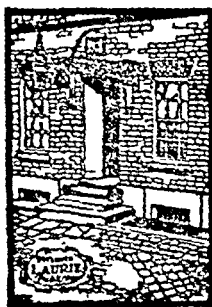


MIDNIGHT
ON THE
PLACE PIGALLE



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"On the way Monsieur Serge hung on to Monsieur Prosper's arm."

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

By

MAURICE DEKOBRA

Translated from "Minuit
. . . Place Pigalle" by
Metcalf Wood and with
twelve illustrations by Jean
Oberle on Japon paper

London

T. WERNER LAURIE LTD.

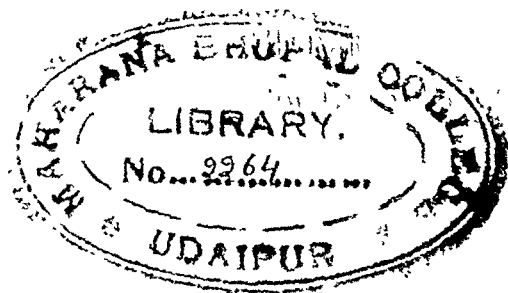
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*No scene in this story is taken from life and
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First Published in Great Britain 1932

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
NORTHUMBRIA PRESS LIMITED NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE



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PREFACE

(written at the edge of the table)

It was raining that evening in Montmartre. The lights in the little cafés in the rue Germain-Pilon illuminated opalescent window-panes streaked with watery lines. I was sitting at a marble-topped table, my wet boots on the sawdust floor. In this humble café was a weary-looking girl, her khaki-coloured waterproof worn at the cuffs; and a solemn-looking underground railway guard drinking a mazagran. The waiter, lolling with his elbows on the pay-desk, was whispering sweet nothings to the lady in charge; a Romeo in a white apron making love to a dour and dropsical Juliet.

A glass of Calvados was a poor consolation in my solitude. Bored to death, tired of reading the "Late News" in the Intransigent, I was just about to go when a man came in.

"Adolphe!" I exclaimed

He shook hands and sat down beside me, unbuttoning his overcoat and displaying a well-cut suit. A casual observer, as the serial writers say, would have taken him for a man about town. But he was merely a maître d'hôtel.

I enjoy talking to the head waiters of night restaurants. One gets curious side-lights on the sordidness of humanity and strange glimpses of the duplicity of women. I had first known Adolphe some years ago, a period in my life when the joys of the bars on the Butte of Montmartre had all the attraction of forbidden fruit. I immediately offered him a small marc, and we chatted. He told me that at the moment he was working at the Faisan Royal.

"By the way," he added, laughing, "I must tell you the latest thing that has happened at the cabaret. It occurred only yesterday, so it has not had time to get stale. Well, for some time we've noticed a curious customer

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who has been hanging around our bar, and also around several others in the district; a huge fellow with a pasty face and a double chin, wearing a long coat. He always sat alone and invariably drank a gin-fizz. He used to talk about the Bible to any of the young girls who sat near him, and asked Providence to forgive them their sins.

“The manager of the Narcisse-Bar, the best informed man between the Place Blanche and the Place Pigalle, had told Gaby, a chorus girl at the Cigale:

“‘That guy is a Scotch parson. His name is MacGinger. He is a Presbyterian Minister who tries to put down immorality in big cities. . . . My pal Edward, who used to be a wine waiter at the Carlton in London, saw him there last winter. He was giving away blue crosses and little books on how to live a moral life.’

“‘He was, as you might say, a saint on the spree,’ Gaby chipped in.

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" 'That's the idea' "

" Last night the Faisan Royal was crowded. Several women, lolling on the crimson velvet seats, were humming catchy tunes played by a Spanish guitarist. Suddenly there was a buzz of conversation near the door.

" 'There he is! ' said Loulou, nudging her friend Léa's elbow. ' Now we shall have some fun! ' "

" 'Is that the parson? Good heavens! What a mug! ' "

" And I give you my word that Léa's irreverent remark was not unjustified. The Reverend MacGinger certainly had a comic appearance. Clean shaven, bald, sad-looking eyes and double chin, he reminded one very much of one of the Puritan Fathers who sailed on the Mayflower to the New World. Wearing cotton gloves, he carried a green leather-backed book in his right hand. It was a Bible. He sat down at the next table to Loulou.

“ ‘Gaaarcon,’ he called out. . . . ‘A gin-fizz!’ ”

“Loulou and Léa, who were making the running with two young men, very attracted by their piquant beauty, thought it would be amusing to have a game with this saintly gentleman.

“ ‘Good evening, monsieur,’ said Loulou with an engaging smile.

“ ‘Guid evening, my child,’ replied Mac-Ginger with great dignity. . . . ‘We have met here before, if I am not mistaken?’ ”

“ ‘Why, yes. . . . And how are you?’ ”

“The ice was broken. As I was close to them I heard every word. Loulou and Léa pinched each other under the table and tried not to laugh.

“ ‘Don’t you think you are doing wrong spending your nights in these pernicious haunts?’ said the reverend gentleman suddenly. ‘I must tell you that you are going on the downward path making eyes at these

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gentlemen out on the spree You ought
to give up this horrible sort of life and work
with the hands that the Creator has given
you'

"Loulou whispered in her friend's ear

"'That's all right he is getting wound
up We'll soon lead him on '

"Then, turning to the Scotsman, she asked
ingenuously

"'What sort of work would you advise,
monsieur?'

"'My child, you ought to dig the prolific
soil of your forefathers You must cul-
tivate vegetables in the fresh, open air'

"'Make the peas sprout, eh?' suggested
Léa cynically

"'Peas, wheat and all the fruits of the earth
look after the little domestic creatures
the cows, the calves . . .'

"'I know the little domestic creatures you
mean,' exclaimed Loulou noisily

"MacGinger continued his sermonizing

Unfortunately, the appearance of two of the young ladies' admirers cut short his efforts. Loulou and Léa paid no further attention to him, so his words were lost on the desert air.

"However, at that moment a very smartly dressed lady came and sat down at a neighbouring table. It was Régine Alix, a well-known lady of no importance, who was only too glad to escape for the time being from her luxurious house in the Avenue Hoche, and, without her official protector's knowledge, have a good time in Montmartre.

"She appeared to know the reverend gentleman quite well, for she hailed him cordially. MacGinger, as he turned, solemnly acknowledged her greeting. Régine sat down, and throwing back her mink coat, called for some champagne, as her dainty fingers fondled her pearl necklace.

"Five minutes later she was chatting to her neighbour. She did not poke fun at him, not she—oh no! She was quite unlike Loulou

"The reverend gentleman listened, but did not appear to grasp the point of her remarks

"*'Monsieur Pastor,' she added, 'would you be kind enough to take care of my pearls whilst we go and have a little champagne on the next floor?'*

"The appealing glance of the penitent overcoming the clergyman's scruples, he replied

"*'Madame, I admit to you that I do not like the idea of taking charge of your jewellery but I shall be happy to make an exception in your case'*

"*'Oh! thank you! thank you'*

"And Régine immediately unfastened her necklace and handed it, under the table, to the pastor

"*'You will be here for some time, won't you? You don't mind waiting,' she murmured 'Thank you once more So long'*

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLÉ

"Régine got up, made a sign to the 'Antinous' in evening dress, and disappeared.

"A few minutes later MacGinger called the waiter:

" 'My bill?' he said.

"He paid it, left a good tip, and sedately went out with his green leather book under his arm. Unfortunately, I did not notice him, as I was engaged attending to other customers.

"It was barely ten minutes after he had gone when two men in plain clothes called our manager into the entrance-hall. They produced cards proving that they were police inspectors.

" 'We wish to search your rooms,' one of them said. 'We think that there is a notorious English thief here who poses as a clergyman in night restaurants, and we hold an extradition order for him from London.' "

My friend had finished his story. I ordered two more glasses of Calvados, and we went on chatting till one in the morning. When we

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

left the café the rain had stopped I said good-bye to Monsieur Adolphe As his figure was silhouetted in the dim light of the rue des Martyrs, I pondered over his confidences, and I thought that the maître d'hôtel of a night restaurant would make a good hero for a novel, that would be popular in an age in which Tristan, astride his symbolical sword, is ready to fight Isolde, and Don Quixote allows himself to be taken to the public infirmary, Charlotte chooses Werther as a godchild from the small advertisements in La Vie Parisienne, and Philippe Darblay, the Ironmaster, overcomes the refusal of Claire de Beaulieu with a bundle of National War Bonds

MAURICE DEKOBRA

CHAPTER I

"HAVE you heard the news?" said the wine waiter to the under-cellarman as he held a bottle of Clos-Vougeot to the light to see if it was quite clear. "Monsieur Prosper is thinking of leaving us."

"What? Monsieur Prosper quitting the *Flamant Rose*? Has he had a bust-up with the manager?"

"No. He is retiring and going to live on his means."

"Oh! Good Lord!"

The under-cellarman put his wine basket on the damp sanded floor of the basement and looked at the wine waiter.

"It's quite true, my boy. Monsieur Prosper is a far-seeing cove who has had the sense to save a nice bit of money during the twenty-five

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

years that he has been the *maître d'hôtel* here."

"Why, how old is he?"

"Sixty And as full of life as a good Beaujolais Catch this bottle and take it to No 9"

The wine waiter, with the irreverence of a man blasé to gastronomic pleasures, tossed the bottle of Clos-Vougeot into space, where it described a parabola before it landed into the cellarman's black apron Two minutes later his subordinate served it to the customers supping at table No 9, lying in a basket; and he handled it with as great care as an anarchist carrying an infernal machine

The news was carried from the cellarman to the dish-washers, and from the dish-washers to the waiters By half-past twelve the whole personnel of the *Flamant Rose* cabaret was aware of the approaching departure of Monsieur Prosper And the comments were many and varied

"It'll be a good thing if Prosper goes," the chef remarked. "He's an old rotter."

"Oh! . . . he's not so bad, chef," the pastry-cook protested. "I've no complaint against old Prosper."

"I know what I'm talking about. . . . When I offered to share with him what we made in doing the manager over the fish and the game, he said: 'Chef, I don't stand for that. And if you do any *douchy dichy* business I will tip the wink to Monsieur Parmelan.' That's a nice way to carry on!"

"I don't know," remarked the page-boy, who had left the entrance-hall so that he could enjoy the remains of a *Savarin à l'Impériale* on the corner of the table littered with vegetables and pea-pods. "Monsieur Prosper is a smart man. . . . You should hear what people say about him, all of you. . . . Some of our regular clients have said in front of me: 'Monsieur Prosper is not a *maître d'hôtel*, he is Master Gourmet.' That's a fact, chef. . . . I'll bet

you a couple of francs there's more than one blinking customer who'll give the house a miss when they find that Monsieur Prosper has hopped it "

The chef shrugged his shoulders and shot a jet of saliva into a casserole of *cèpes à la provençale*

"Will they?" he muttered "Well, p'r'aps that'll help them to forget the old swine "

In the scullery, where a couple of dishwashers were at work washing up in a tank of water as black and muddy as the stream of a main sewer, the news was discussed

"All the 'birds' of the house will miss old Prosper," said a ruffianly-looking man with muscles like a gladiator, who, after he had dried the plates, rubbed them on the seat of his trousers in order to show his contempt for the customers

"You're right," murmured his companion, with the dish-cloth on his arm . "The

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

old boy has been a good 'uncle' to the girls of the place. . . . He very soon finds them a client."

"He must have made a good bit one way and another."

"Alfred, the last page-boy before you came, told me one day that old Prosper pocketed a louis on every 'marriage.'"

"That job would suit me, that would. . . . But I've no hopes, not me; I shall never be a *maître d'hôtel*. . . . I've often been told so."

"Why?"

"My breath's bad. And that would spoil the customers' appetites."

Such were the remarks, true and unfounded, that were exchanged that evening amongst the employees of the *Flamant Rose*. Monsieur Prosper was certainly the king of the *maîtres d'hôtel*: His fame had spread beyond the limits of the Place Pigalle, and anyone in Paris who prided himself on being a gourmet knew Monsieur Prosper of the *Flamant Rose*. This

Doctor of the Culinary Arts loved good living in a dilettante way. That is to say, he did not indulge in it himself, but he was happy to see his clients enjoying themselves, for he looked upon them as his disciples. It gave him extreme pleasure to suggest a menu and to choose the wines that should be taken with the fish, the roast or the game. He did it all for glory, since he himself was on a diet which only allowed him to take vermicelli and vegetables plainly boiled, but he was contented, and his disinterestedness demanded no other reward than a pleasant smile from a satisfied customer—a customer who had eaten heartily and at the end of the meal remarked.

“Prosper I have dined very well.”

He used to pocket a good tip, as was his due, and, with all the fervour at his command, would whisper into the gastronomist's ear:

“The next time, monsieur, I will see that you have *foies de lotte à la Tartare*, and a *filet* of venison soaked in sherry and *curaçao à la*



"He was happy to see his clients enjoying themselves for he looked upon them as his disciples."

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

Pravaz. . . . A dream of a dish! You'll see! "

The page-boy was right when he said that the departure of Monsieur Prosper would be a loss to the cabaret. But the dish-washer was wrong when he accused Monsieur Prosper of earning doubtful money as a match-maker.

Not that Monsieur Prosper was not a good genius to lonely little ladies; but this good genius did not sell his miracles. Monsieur Prosper was an honest man. He accepted a tip from a contented diner. He refused a commission from a grateful courtesan. On this subject Monsieur Prosper had very definite ideas. He knew life. For the last thirty years he had witnessed too many silent dramas, too many tragedies played in secret by frightened actors, not to be extremely broad-minded. But the disappointed *grue* obviously fed up, sitting all alone, the kept woman, deserted by her protector, aroused far too much pity in his heart for him to think of benefiting

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

from their misfortunes. Generous and discreet, he listened to the outpourings of an unfortunate one, consoled her and gave her advice and hope, and, as soon as an opportunity occurred, he introduced her to a lonely customer, he pointed her out to a sentimental-looking man, and felt that he earned his reward when a happy expression lit up the face of the fair lady and a smile played round her made-up lips and her painted eyes.

"Monsieur Prosper," said the pretty habituées of the *Flamant Rose*, "he's the man to introduce you to the boys."

This was not casual praise on the part of the lights o' love. For there was not one of them who was not beholden to him. The devotees of the Artificial Paradise were able to obtain, thanks to him, the address of a purveyor of cocaine or of an opium dealer, and the degenerates confided their wishes to him in the hope that he might satisfy them by giving them suitable introductions. The Great Chamber-

lain of the Ante-chamber of Vice moved among the poisons and the passions without ever getting tainted, and without ever losing the genial cordiality of a blasé man, looking upon degenerates and night-birds as children that it was his duty to guide and advise.

One evening, Madame Yvette de Merlanges, who supped frequently near the jazz-band, had asked him, while she was waiting for her *ami* :

“Is it a fact, Monsieur Prosper, that you are very proper? . . . My friend Colette told me the other day that you never kick over the traces. . . .”

Monsieur Prosper smiled as he carefully put a knife and fork in their proper position, and replied :

“No, madame. . . . I am like the pastry-cooks, who never touch their pastries.”

“Oh! . . . Monsieur Prosper!” Madame Merlanger simpered. . . . “Are you, then, so disgusted with us?”

“It is a matter of prudence, madame. . . .

cashier in a bouillon in the rue des Martyrs Modest and contented, she solemnly made out the bills *bonaf gros sel* and the "mutton chop and chips" as she pictured the nightly prowesses of her lover under the golden glare of the *Flamant Rose*. For as she worked in this popular restaurant, used by the unprosperous, she looked up to her lover who presided so efficiently over pompous nightly orgies Monsieur Prosper had never deceived her.

"You would make a serious mistake if you were unfaithful to me," said Louise, one night when he got home to the rue des Abbesses "It would be a wicked thing to do, and Providence would punish you, and you would contract a terrible illness."

Monsieur Prosper laughed at this prediction. He could hardly imagine the Great Creator worrying about his private life, and determining to punish him by sowing his paths of vice and side-walks of voluptuousness with pathological microbes. But he thought also. "That

bad luck is very liable to happen; that the game is not worth the candle, and that it would be a poor thing to do to upset Louise, who, after all, was a very good sort."

He did not love her madly; he did not feel for her those violent and devouring passions which upset all moral laws and lead to catastrophes. He was a little bit tired of her hare-lip which, at the outset, had given a new zest to their kisses; and the blotchiness of his darling's plump cheeks reminded him of a York ham. But he consol'd himself with the thought that no woman is perfect. Even the most beautiful have their spots and imperfections. He had noticed at the *Flamant Rose* many little details which had shattered any such illusions as definitely as the slash of the slaughterer's knife cut the hocks of a calf on the slaughter-house bench. He had heard extremely pretty clients joking with the cloak-room attendant about their ailments, as they covered their suspicious pimply complexions

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who is saying farewell to this wild form of amusement

He gazed at his faithful habitués young gentlemen just out of ticket of leave, visitors rolling in money, travellers from the East or millionaires of doubtful nationality who, only yesterday, were in the habit of eating with their fingers, and to-day dazzled Paris with their wealth, South American gentlemen with pesos galore, and taciturn Yankees with tons of dollars. He called to mind also well-known figures of Parisian society, the show ladies of the pitiful whirligig who follow the crowd from Montmartre to Deauville, and from Biarritz to Monte Carlo. He visualized, under the glittering lights, the tango of Slander and Concupiscence, the *Mèdia-Luna* of Hypocrisy and the *Corte* of Deceit clinging to the pinnacle of Debauch. It seemed to him that the customers, exhilarated by champagne, bent over the fleshless gums of Cleath's heads, and that the strings of pearls adorned the bony necks

of skeletons dressed by the rue de la Paix. He gave a slight shudder, shrugged his shoulders, and fancied that these stupid and straight-laced visions were the result of a novel that he had finished reading the previous night. Although his education was only rudimentary, he had read; he had been observant; he had made use of his experiences in his daily contact with Parisian gay life. "So," he murmured to himself as he arranged the dessert, consisting of enormous strawberries lying in cotton-wool, "I am an idiot. . . . Ah, these puppets are quite harmless, and I want them to carry on their capers until the end of time."

Resolving, therefore, to bury joyfully his life as a café waiter, he became a supreme optimist. Why invoke death's heads? Why give way to puerile symbolism worthy of a disgruntled rhymster, who screams at the feet of the rich like a dirty little cur barking when a dignified borzoi passes by? All the men of the world, all these new rich, all these pleasure-seekers were delight-

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE FIGALLE

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ful people, as necessary to society as feathers are necessary to a peacock's tail. Try to fill their empty heads with serious thoughts or sensible ideas? What would be the good? There must be some clowns in the world to satisfy the crooks.

So Monsieur Prosper took his fill, with all eyes and ears on this last evening. He found pleasure and amusement in the somewhat elderly and slightly faded beauties hanging on their dull lovers' necks, and saw the funny side of the old freaks who panted popular airs into the ears of distraught courtesans. He was quite right to enjoy himself. In France ridicule no longer kills, and dancing-halls and cabarets are not strewn every day with corpses and dying.

"Monsieur le Baron, I have had great difficulty in reserving that table for you. The one over there. Come with me, Monsieur le Baron."

Baron Hedwig had just arrived accompanied by la Baronne. They were a well-known

couple at the *Flamant Rose*. They were a godsend to the *grues* when their rent was due, for these placid and fat Scandinavians indulged in tastes worthy of the Parc aux Cerfs. With the cool daring of rich folk who were able to enter into debauch far from home, they came to supper at the *Flamant Rose*, and they selected two suitable young women for an entertainment worthy of the virgins of Mitylene.

Monsieur Prosper, after having taken their order, repeated the confidence that he had made to every customer that day :

“ Monsieur le Baron, it is the last evening that I shall have the honour of serving you.”

“ What? The last evening? ”

“ Yes, I am retiring into the country.”

“ Oh! ”

Baron Hedwig looked at his wife. The Baronne gazed at Monsieur Prosper, and they both heaved a fresh sigh of disappointment.

“ What a pity! ” said the Baronne. “ Who will arrange our frivolous little suppers in the

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

future?" She pronounced the word free-voolous, and seemed terribly upset at losing this excellent manager of their special parties, this cautious adviser who had always guarded them against tiresome interruptions or the unpleasant attentions of the police.

"Prosper," said the Baron as he discreetly slipped a hundred-franc note into the open hand of the *maître d'hôtel*, "we shall miss you greatly now you are going. You must leave us your address. We will send you a little souvenir from Christiania. In the meantime, will you ask Mademoiselles Fernande and Lily if they will take champagne with us this evening?"

Fernande and Lily, sitting on high stools at the bar, were chatting to one another on the usual topics of courtesans out of a job. They were discussing the high price of silk stockings, the baseness of men, and the value of the dollar.

"Fernande!

Lily!" whispered Mon-

sieur Prosper as he passed. . . . "The Norwegians want you. . . . The usual programme. . . . Ten louis each. Is that all right?"

"O.K.," murmured Fernande. . . . "Clients like that are not found every day on a Bobby's beat."

And Lily, as she arranged her marcel waves :

"Come along, kid. . . . Come and think of the death of Louis XVI."

At three o'clock in the morning, while two Englishmen, hopelessly drunk, lolled in a corner like two tailors' dummies, and the last couple were still pirouetting together, Monsieur Prosper collected the personnel of the *Flamant Rose* in the basement, and bid a sad farewell to his comrades.

"It grieves me very much to go," he said, as he emptied the leavings of the bottles into his friends' glasses. "As you know, for the last thirty years I have handed the menu to the customers, and I have put the magnums of

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champagne in the ice-pails to cool I shall think of you all when I am at La Mothe-en-Brie, where I am going to live in retirement, but I shall always remember with a deep feeling of regret the times when together we inhaled the odour of the *assiettes Anglaises*, which smelt of *peau d'Espagne*, and the festive perfumes that mingled with the cold meats "

"You are lucky," said the page-boy, who looked like a colonel in the Horse Guards, in his scarlet uniform with its gold buttons "I envy you when you tell us that you are going to hoe your potatoes and weed your lettuces My dream!"

"You will be greatly missed, Monsieur Prosper," said the ' ' charge of the cloak-room, who had a ' ' for the brilliant *maître d'hôtel* "I ' ' heard all the girls say how sorry they are that you are leaving They told me, as they ' ' their lip-stuck in front of the mirror ' ' nat a shame that Monsieur Prosper is ' ' he's a jolly

good sort. He often helped me when I was stoney, and he never expected anything for it. That's a fact, Madame Cauvilange, and it was jolly decent of him.' "

As Monsieur Prosper was chatting in the basement, the barman came down and said, in a rather mysterious manner: "Monsieur Prosper, Mademoiselle Charlotte wants to speak to you upstairs."

"Charlotte, the tall, dark girl? "

"Yes, the one that you introduced the other evening to that drunken Armenian. . . . She wants a word with you."

Monsieur Prosper went up to the bar. It was almost empty. There were only four of the regular customers there.

"Monsieur Prosper," said the tall Charlotte, looking a trifle embarrassed, like a small girl who was just going to make a complimentary little speech to her grandfather. . . . "Immediately we heard that you were leaving, we decided, that is Lucienne, Irma, Georgette and

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myself, to offer you a little trifle to show our good feeling towards you, and to show our gratitude for the kindnesses you have done us Oh! it's nothing much Just a cigarette-case with our names engraved inside

So that you will not forget us, and you will know that your thoughtfulness was not unappreciated "

Monsieur Prosper, very touched, opened the silver case and read the inscription inside, which ran as follows

To Monsieur Prosper
A small token of gratitude from

LUCIENNE

IRMA

GEORGETTE.

CHARLOTTE

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "you are too kind
I am quite overcome . You ought
not to have !"

"Certainly we ought!"

"Why, yes!" protested Georgette with twinkling eyes. "Of course we ought. . . . Only think of it, thanks to you I went across the sea for the first time. . . ."

"No!"

"It's a fact. Last summer you introduced me to an Englishman who took me to Brighton. . . . I have never been so disappointed in all my life. But I had a very good time, all the same."

"You must keep this and think of us, Monsieur Prosper."

"You see, we are four, like the three Musketeers," added Charlotte. "And if ever you think of us in your little village, you can say to yourself that there are three little birds in Paris, and a big goose, who do not forget you in their prayers at *Notre Dame de la Debine* and *Saint Antoine des Purotins*."

Monsieur Prosper was indeed deeply touched. He put the case in his pocket, and said in a slightly tremulous voice:

"I should like to kiss you all, my dear children "

And while the barman arranged his glasses and shakers, Monsieur Prosper kissed each of the girls' cheeks as they offered them to him. It was a patriarchal and charming spectacle.

At four o'clock in the morning, after he had shaken hands with the manager, Monsieur Parmelan, he found himself in the deserted and silent Place Pigalle. The first rays of dawn lit up the sky as the jagged profile of the roofs stood out against a background of pale blue. He cast a sweeping glance around the Place, the hub of the amusement world, and walked slowly towards the rue des Abbesses. He began to reflect. Had he been wrong in leaving the *Flamant Rose*? Did his decision cause him any regret? No, he was weary of breathing the dusty atmosphere of the cabaret, tired of smiling at all those imbeciles and listening to their sinister laughter. Ah! how pleasant and enjoyable the peaceful country-

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side would seem after thirty years of Paris life.

He quickened his step and reached his flat on the sixth floor. Louise had reached his flat. She was in her chemise, her forehead decorated with little screws of paper. She looked more than ever like a frilled ham. But in his discontented frame of mind he did not dwell on these disparaging comparisons. He kissed his darling and said gaily:

"Louisette, since four minutes past four I have been a retired gentleman. The *Flamant* Rose will see me no more."

"So much the better,"

"And how did your last evening go off?" replied Louise. . . .

"See . . . look at this!"

And with a sweeping gesture!

Prosper put seven hundred and fifty francs on the table: the sum total of his tips and presents from old customers.

"Well, what do you think of that, old girl?"

I've made seven hundred and fifty francs

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between eleven and two o'clock; the salary of a star "

"My word!" "Wait a minute

"And that isn't all . . . Look!"

Shut your eyes

The cigarette-case glittered in the palm of his hand

"Oh! A present!"

"That's right. A souvenir. . . The

girls who frequent the bar have clubbed together to give it to me "

This explanation brought a shadow over Louise's face

"It's the girls who have given you that?"

"Yes "

"Let me look "

Louise opened the case and caught sight of the inscription. She read it aloud twice over

"*Lucienne, Irma, Georgette, Charlotte?*

"That's a nice thing?" "—it's a nice thing?"

"How do you mean?" "From those gruees?"

"You accept present?"

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"But it's quite all right. . . . They presented it to me officially in front of everybody, as a souvenir. There's nothing wrong about it. It's not as if it had been given on the quiet, like a *cocotte* slipping it under the pillow of her gigolo."

"M'yes. . . . But it seems to me a very strange thing that these women should club together for this present in your honour. You must have done some very questionable favours for them."

"Louise! You are joking. . . ."

"It isn't for nothing that they have given you this charming memento. You have certainly been sleeping with them."

"You're mad."

"All right, my dear, but I wasn't born yesterday. . . ."

"Anyone can see that."

"P'r'aps so, but at any rate you will oblige me by not using that case when I am about."

Prosper shrugged his shoulders.

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"Anyhow it's a moth-eaten looking thing," Louise muttered "They have not ruined themselves on your account, your little darlings "

"Moth-eaten you call it? All engine-turned and a ruby clasp "

"Some ruby, my dear! I don't think "

"Don't be silly! When you leave your place at the end of the month, you'll see, the customers will no doubt give you a grand piano "

With this final shot, Monsieur Prosper put the case into the drawer of the table near the bed, and slipped between the sheets alongside Louise. While his companion snored upon her back, he dreamt of the fowls and rabbits that he was going to buy with the seven hundred and fifty francs from his farewell night

CHAPTER II

LA MOTHE-EN-BRIE is a little town neither prettier nor uglier than the majority of country-places of the Brie district. There is a main street which runs right through it, crossed by country lanes, where farmyards and fenced-in orchards alternate. Clumps of trees surround the tiled houses, like bunches of parsley round a lobster, and the church tower stands up above the roofs like a schoolmaster among his pupils.

La Mothe-en-Brie has all the usual embellishments of old French townships. A level-crossing, a local constable, a station café and a village idiot.

The idiot suffers from goitre, and the municipality tolerate him because he acts as the local dustman. He lives on the household refuse, and saves them a man and a cart.

Among the other curiosities of La Mothe-en-Brie may be mentioned the regular customers of the Station Café, that is to say. Monsieur Lassonge, the schoolmaster, Monsieur Troux, the deputy mayor, Monsieur Bigarce, the retired lawyer, and Monsieur Mandibel, the blacksmith. These four inseparable cronies play the same part in La Mothe-en-Brie as the *Norns* in German mythology. They do not watch over the destinies of the dwellers of Valhalla, but they take an enormous interest in the affairs of the township and its inhabitants. They interest themselves even in affairs that do not concern them, and are ever ready to comment in very direct language on the sayings and doings of their neighbours.

The arrival of Monsieur Prosper Migeot and Louise Mérigal at La Mothe-en-Brie was an event. Monsieur Prosper had inherited a little property, farm and farmhouse situated at the corner of the Coulommiers road and the main street at the north end of the village.

Everybody had learnt that the farm had passed into the hands of a Parisian, but his profession was not definitely known. Some suggested that Monsieur Prosper had been a pianist at a cinema; others that he was the manager of a music-hall bar on the Boulevards; others said that he was a guide in Montmartre. But as no one had ever seen Monsieur Prosper in the village, his position remained rather vague. When it became known that he had given notice to his tenant, and that he was about to come with his wife and occupy the farm, the curiosity of the worthies was aroused, and Monsieur Troux, the deputy mayor, was asked to find out all about him. Consequently astonishing details concerning the man who intended to end his days at La Mothe-en-Brie were brought to light. Monsieur Troux, who was born at Toulon, naturally exaggerated everything, and told his companions that Monsieur Prosper was the manager of a celebrated cabaret in Montmartre, that he had

mixed with the smartest people in the capital and was retiring after having made a fortune

The arrival of Monsieur Prosper enhanced still further the reputation that Monsieur Troux's revelations had built up for him. At sixty years of age Monsieur Prosper was quite distinguished-looking. He might have been taken for a president of the American Republic, with his clean-shaven face, his keen eyes and his grey hair. Having lived a careful life, he looked well preserved, and had the bearing of a successful man.

Monsieur Troux, who had made these inquiries regarding the past life of this new citizen, and who was happy to see such a notable addition come into the place, was the first person to welcome him and assure him of the goodwill of his new neighbours. He made quite a personal matter of it. He was delighted to take upon himself the privilege of introducing Monsieur Prosper to the *Café de la Gare*. Before his arrival he fathered him,

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and, not without pride, declared one evening to his friends :

"Messieurs, I am happy to tell you that Monsieur Prosper will come and join us in a game at the beginning of next week. . . . As soon as he has settled down in his house he will become one of our party, and you will see that I told you the simple truth when I said that he is one of the best."

"Yuz! Yuz!" muttered Mandibel, the blacksmith. . . . "You are always enthusiastic about Parisians! A man has only got to come from Paris and you are all over him like a fly round sugar. He's never done anything to kick up a fuss about, your Parisian! "

Monsieur Trous pressed down the tobacco in his packet of caporal, and replied with the superior air of a man who knows :

"Oh! you, Mandibel, you're always against progress, against large towns, science, anything and everything that takes you out of your benighted ideas! "

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"Yuz! Yuz! . Your big towns are
the homes of humbugs and idlers who are
afraid of dirtying their clothes All our
youngsters leave us to go to Paris because there
are cinemas and pigeons to pluck France
could do very well without Paris But
Paris would die of hunger without our veget-
able patches that feed 'em I know what
I know "

Monsieur Bigarce and Monsieur Lassonge
nudged each other's elbows and winked, much
amused They often laughed at Troux and
Mandibel's antagonism, the fiery southerner
and the placid Briard Ah! this Daddy
Mandibel, a regular type of an old villager
hewn with an axe from the stoutest oak!
With his pointed chin, his blotchy nose and his
bushy white hair hanging over his wrinkled
forehead, he had the appearance of a champion
of country life, a defender of the much despised
land, deserted by its ungrateful children
And he boasted, obstinate old fellow, that he

had never set foot in Paris and would die without seeing the Eiffel Tower. He was not a fool by any means—far from it. As he hammered the nails in the horses' hoofs he could carry on a clear and logical argument and could make his points.

"Monsieur Prosper will be very welcome," replied the lawyer, who had the unctuous manner of an Italian prelate, and who, at heart, was delighted that a man well versed in the mysteries of Paris life was coming to cheer up their conversations.

"It appears that this Monsieur Prosper has mixed with very smart people up there?" Lassonge, the schoolmaster, remarked in a questioning tone of voice as he shuffled the cards.

"Ah! my boy," exclaimed the deputy mayor, with the air of a man who knows and who could give much information on the point. "You have no idea of the cabaret that Monsieur Prosper has managed! . . . It is

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simply wonderful A bottle of champagne costs one hundred and twenty francs, a leg of chicken fifty francs, a slice of ham twenty-five francs, an orange ten francs . . . It is called the *Flamant Rose* . . . American millionaires and the smartest set in Paris dance there to an orchestra composed of negroes "

"Of negroes? "

"Yes, my boy And they jig all night long with naked women, doing serpentine dances and drink champagne by the gallon "

"It makes me sick to hear about it," grunted the blacksmith

"You are right Monsieur Prosper has mixed with all sorts . He has been on very friendly terms with princes and marquises So you have only to ask him to recount some of his experiences "

Mandibel chewed the mouthpiece of his clay pipe, which was wrapped with twine, and ended by shaking his head

"Yuz! Yuz! I understand I

suppose we've got to put white gloves on to play cards with this gentleman."

"No, no, my dear old man, you're wrong. You will find him very simple in his ways, and very friendly. . . ."

Whereupon the schoolmaster dealt the cards for the game. Monsieur Bigarce bid fifty-five. The bid was accepted. The game was about to commence when old Mandibel looked up with his ruddy face and remarked, more to himself than to the others:

"My God! . . . Fifty francs for the leg of a chicken! What in heaven's name does one have to pay in that hole of a place for a 'bird'?"

The introduction of Monsieur Prosper to the *Café de la Gare* was a great event. Monsieur Bigredoux, the proprietor of the café, was proud to do the honour of his modest establishment to a Prince of the Great World. He welcomed him like an old literary man receiv-

ing the visit of a great master Monsieur Troux invited Monsieur Prosper to sit beside him on the settee, while the lawyer, the schoolmaster and the blacksmith took cane chairs and sat facing him

Monsieur Lassonge had a face like a weasel, and the ferrety eyes of a conscientious government official who spends his evenings in checking his totals and examining the tariff table. He had never stepped over the traces, poor man, but he had read greedily many novels of Parisian life in which the author describes the marvellous life of the metropolis, and initiates the reader to hectic scenes which happen in *cabinets particuliers*, and collects intimate details of the lives of famous coquettes. So he looked forward to the savoury revelations that their new companion would certainly be able to give them

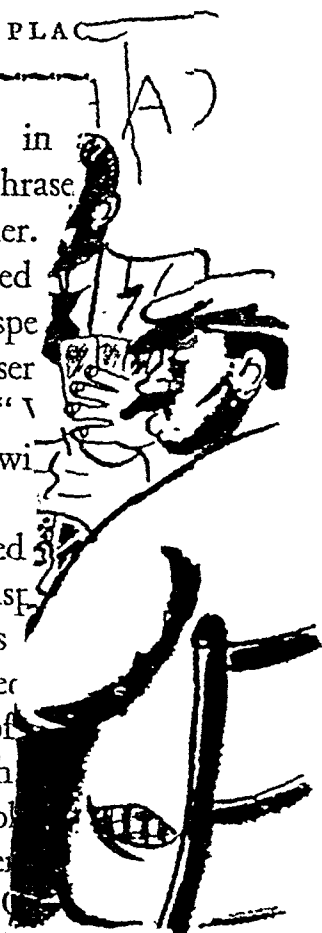
Monsieur Bigarce, as a skilled lawyer bubbling over with diplomacy, scrutinized Monsieur Prosper over his spectacles. He

rivalled the schoolmaster in expressed, in well-turned phrase the arrival of the new-comer.

Mandibel alone remained his eye on Monsieur Prosper hands in his corduroy trouser to be saying to himself: "V all, he is not a sheep wi wonderful Parisian!"

Monsieur Prosper talked down at the farm; his dis way company about his Monsieur Troux suggested When there were five of this simple game, which Monsieur Lassonge free job Matches served as counter worth half a centime.

had suggested that they s' of the stakes to stimulat Daddy Mandibel, who v did not like to lose, prot



Queen of Spades."

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ing the visit at a point? Ho-ho! Master Troux invited and see very well you've been him on the settlements for thirty years "

master and the blarce did not appreciate these sat facing him ed at the blacksmith over his

Monsieur Lasse deputy mayor chuckled with and the ferrety eye cards

ment official who super had a lucky start off ing his totals and the Queen of Spades

He had never steely," remarked the school-man, but he had ten years had never failed to Parisian life in whiresome comment

marvellous life of tl looked at his cards The the reader to hectordibel scratched his chin *cabinets particuliers*, it out his hand to take the of the lives of famou

forward to the saver," said Monsieur Troux new companion wound as a hard-roed herring " them . I will leave her for

Monsieur Bigarce knows the ladies better bubbling over with

Monsieur Prosper ovsmulingly took the queen



"The lawyer played the Queen of Spades."

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and won the game. He won fifteen matches. The game lasted an hour. Monsieur Prosper ended up with eighty matches. He had won eight sous. Being generous, he stood a round of old *marc* to his fellow-players and talked of the *Flamant Rose*, as they were dying to hear—except Mandibel—some spicy details concerning this famous cabaret. They might have been disciples of the Mephistopheles of Montmartre, eager to follow him in his wanderings through Walpurgis.

“Isn’t it a fact,” said Monsieur Troux, who asked direct questions in order to show that he possessed technical knowledge of night life, “that your best customers were Argentine and American tourists visiting Paris?”

“Yes. You see, with their exchange they don’t mind what they spend. A supper for fifty louis is a flea-bite to them. Not to mention the money they spend on the girls. We had a New Yorker who used to come every Saturday and have a party with four girls. . . .

Do you know what his great amusement was?

He " Monsieur Prosper recounted the details of the party in a whisper

" Ah! Devil take it! " exclaimed Daddy Mandibel, slapping his thighs

The lawyer nodded his head in a knowing manner. The schoolmaster, shocked, took a sip at his glass of *marc*. Monsieur Prosper's revelations made the pale descriptions in Octave Feuillet's novels that he had read sink into an ocean of puerility. Monsieur Troux winked his eyes as much as to say: " There! What did I tell you? "

But old Mandibel was overcome with stupefied amazement, and kept on repeating, as he continued to slap his thighs: " What disgusting minds they've got in Paris! "

" And let me tell you, " said Monsieur Prosper calmly, " that this American was by no means an exception. I could write a good many books if I knew how to wield the pen.

You can imagine that in thirty years I

have seen all sorts of goings-on; men on the binge who have plenty of money to spend. . . . However, one gets accustomed to them. . . . One night I went into a private dining-room and found an old boy with the ice-pail on his head amusing himself by . . .” Monsieur Prosper’s voice sank to a whisper.

“Naturally, that must seem very extraordinary to you. But when one is amongst it all the time, one takes very little notice.”

“All I can say is,” said the lawyer, as he polished his glasses, “human nature is sometimes very coarse.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. . . . Every now and then she breaks loose because she is ordinarily kept in check by prejudices. At those times she kicks over the traces from sheer necessity.”

The clock on the café wall struck seven. Monsieur Prosper got up, shook hands with his new friends and went off.

“Ah, well?” queried the deputy mayor.

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"You are right," said the lawyer "He is extremely entertaining!"

"And not stuck up, as you see," remarked the schoolmaster

"I took him to be a good sort And I didn't make a mistake," concluded the deputy mayor

But old Mandibel had his word to say He added

"Yuz! Yuz! . I don't see why he should think himself superior to us To speak plainly, he was, as one might say, the manager of a loose house"

The others protested They felt a personal slight at the blacksmith's remark.

"The *Flamant Rose* is not a house of that kind," Monsieur Troux insisted

"There is nothing discreditable in keeping a restaurant," said Monsieur Bigarce

"Monsieur Bigredoux manages the Station Café very well Would you say the same of him?" inquired Monsieur Lassonge

But Daddy Mandibel was obstinate. He knocked his pipe against the corner of the table and replied :

“I should say the same of Bigredoux if he permitted goings-on like that in his café.”

It was a gorgeous June morning, with a blazing sun. The country had been refreshed by a storm during the night, and every leaf was covered with spangles and the branches shone with moisture.

Monsieur Prosper, wearing galoshes and in his shirt-sleeves, had taken Louise by the arm, and, standing near the fence that surrounded his kitchen garden, they drank in the fresh air and basked in the sun.

“Ha! old girl,” said Monsieur Prosper. “What a change from the Place Pigalle!”

“I should think so indeed. . . . Look at the foliage of the trees and compare it with the miserable specimens in the Square d’Anvers!”

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"I realize it now My word! I was a fool not to leave that wretched cabaret five years ago I should not have saved quite so much, it is true, but one does not need much money to live here Our garden supplies us with plenty of vegetables You, you have the rabbits in their hutches and the fowls in their pens There is fruit enough to sell So what more is there we want to be happy? Niggers beating drums and women smothered in powder and paint? No, thank you . I'm taking in so much fresh air that I think I shall burst "

"You're a great big baby "

"And now, Louise, we must share the work here. You, you must take charge of the poultry and the rabbits Of course, you know, they won't thrive by merely petting them It isn't enough to put a ribbon round the neck of the favourite black rabbit . All these creatures want daily attention "

"Naturally, Prosper I know that better than you do "

"I, I will look after the kitchen garden and the orchard. . . . As for the ten acres of meadowland, I shall hand them over to Father Mathieu, our neighbour, who will attend to it for one-third of the crop. . . . He will also give me a few tips about grafting. For I promise you, that although now I only know how to weed the peas and hoe the cabbage plants, I shall soon be able to graft a pear tree on to a Virginia creeper."

"You'll be a wonderful farmer, won't you?"

"You chatterbox, Louise. Come and see if our salad plants have grown since yesterday evening."

And, happy as lords in their new estate, they walked to the lettuce-bed and cast tender glances at the rows of little plants large enough for a doll's table.

"Oh!" exclaimed Monsieur Prosper.
"There's a slug on the fifth to the left. . . .
Don't move, Louise. . . ."

He bent down, took off the slug with two bits of stick, and squashed it on the path

"You see," he said seriously, "one has to keep one's eyes open. I read in my gardening book that a slug eats seven times its own weight of green leaves in a day. Twenty-five slugs would clear a salad-bed in forty-eight hours.

Remind me to water the lettuces every evening with a mixture of vinegar, nux vomica, bicarbonate of soda and precipitate of sulphur."

"You'll poison us all, my dear boy!"

"Louise, you don't know what you're talking about. You go and look after your charges."

Behind the main portion of the house there was a sort of barn, a rabbit hutch and a fowl-run.

"Look at my darling little Russian rabbits!"

Louise took one up by the ears and put it in her apron.

"See," remarked Monsieur Prosper, as he bent over the animal, "What's

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the matter with him? His eyes are all red. . . .”

“What of that?”

“You don’t think he’s ill, do you?”

“No, you silly. Russian rabbits always have red eyes! Ah! my dear boy, I warn you not to talk like that in the village. You’ll get your leg pulled . . . and how!”

Then they went on to the fowl-run.

“There are two!” exclaimed Louise triumphantly.

“Two what?”

“Two eggs. . . . They’re still quite warm.”

The hen flew off, flapping her wings clumsily and clucking with alarm. Her clucks in a minor key aroused the cock, who was asleep in a corner, like a weary Don Juan. At first he followed the hen, then stopped and looked at Prosper and Louise with his round eye under his red comb. He seemed to ask them to leave him alone, and in future

not to drive away his hens when they were busy laying their daily eggs

"What a cheeky-looking bird that cockerel is!" said Louise, much amused

"He makes me think of Freddy, the little gigolo who used to come to the *Flamant Rose* And all the *grues* fell for him one after the other, dazzled by the gold in his mouth"

"Take care! take care!" exclaimed Louise
"You are treading on the duck"

Monsieur Prosper's foot had, as a matter of fact, grazed a white duck with yellow beak which, with its head tucked under its wing, was dreaming of inaccessible worms in an Eden full of ponds The duck waddled lamely from the side of the barn and went for an old bit of harness that was lying on the rubbish heap It chewed the mouldy leather in its flat beak and found it uneatable, dropped it contemptuously, and waddled under a wheelbarrow to meditate pessimistically that the world is full of deceptions



"The hen flew off, flapping her wings."

Before returning to the house, Prosper and Louise patted their yard dog that the previous tenant had left them. His name was *Tomato*. It was not a very flattering name for a dog. But the story went that he had formerly belonged to an English stable-boy at Chantilly, who had called him *Tomahawk* after reading Mayne Reid and Fenimore Cooper. His late master had changed *Tomahawk* into *Tomato*. This irreverent appellation was suited to this dog, for, though he was good, he was ugly. He was bred during a storm from a Russian greyhound and a poodle. The result of the cross was startling. *Tomato* had his father's long nose and tail, the small paws and slim body of his mother. He looked like a stove-pipe on four sticks of liquorice.

According to the late tenant, he was a splendid house dog. With *Tomato* in the yard you could sleep in peace.

Prosper and Louise soon came to the conclusion that the generous donor had somewhat

exaggerated Tomato's pluck. One evening about dusk a tramp came into the garden begging. Monsieur Prosper showed the intruder the way out. When he returned to the kitchen, Louise remarked

"How was it Tomato did not fly at this fellow's throat?"

"Quite so. He did not even bark."

Astonished, Monsieur Prosper called him out of the window. Tomato was not in his kennel, nor in the yard, nor in the barn. Monsieur Prosper searched the place, and ended by finding the guardian of his house terrified and trembling in every limb under a barrel in the yard.

Disillusioned regarding the combative zeal of Tomato, Prosper and Louise did not love him the less, just as one loves an ugly child, greedy and badly brought up, in spite of everything. If, however, Tomato did not shine as regards beauty or pluck, at any rate he was remarkable for his appetite. He slipped into

the kitchen and seized a leg of mutton in less time than you could cut a slice: when he had eaten it he had the prudence to take the bone to the dog's kennel at Father Mathieu's, then with an innocent look on his face he came to the table to beg a bit more.

"Look at this fat lump," said Monsieur Prosper. . . . "He thinks of nothing but eating, paying his attentions to the lady dogs and going to sleep. . . . When a mongrel hardly big as your fist barks at him, he runs behind the hen-house, frightened to death. . . . Off to your kennel, you great looby. . . ."

And as if he experienced painful pleasure on hearing these home-truths, he gazed at Monsieur Prosper, wagging his tail and licking his chops slyly, like a fed-up Jesuit who feels that perhaps life has some good purpose after all.

The lawyer lived in the market-place. His wife's dining-room, after mass on a Sunday, was the usual meeting-place of the ladies of

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La Mothe-en-Brie, where they indulged in scandal over a glass of muscatel.

That morning Madame Bigarce, Madame Lassonge and Mademoiselle Fifrelet were talking eagerly. Never had their confab been more animated since its institution, it was about the arrival of Monsieur Prosper in the village.

"Well, for my part, I say deliberately," said Madame Bigarce, "I would stake my life that they are not married!"

"She is not his wife?"

"Oh!"

The lawyer's wife looked her shocked companions full in the face

"They live maritally," she added

That expression "live maritally" sounded terrible to the virtuous ears of Mademoiselle Fifrelet and the religious Madame Lassonge. To them it symbolized the lax morals of the day, a life outside the normal, a bold defiance to ordinary custom and decency

"They are living maritally," murmured Madame Lassonge.

"Yes. And in my opinion it is an old union."

"An old union! Oh! . . ."

That word was still more shocking. Mademoiselle Fifrelet, who was not afraid of plain speaking when circumstances warranted it, remarked:

"According to you, Madame Bigarce, he is living with a loose woman."

"Come! Come! You certainly can't have looked at her to say that," protested Madame Lassonge.

"True, for a woman who has lived that sort of life she lacks attraction. But there, men, as you know, are so queer!"

"Anyway, these are only suppositions, for I suppose, Madame Bigarce, you are not sure about it. . . . Has your husband seen their papers?"

"No. It is the lawyer at Coulommiers who

manages their business. Only, what set me thinking, was what Madame Troux told me the day before yesterday . . . When her husband went to Paris to Monsieur Prosper's home, the postman brought a registered letter addressed to Madame Louise MÉRIGAL. Whereupon the concierge replied: "Monsieur Prosper and Madame MÉRIGAL don't live here any longer."

"So his wife is called Madame MÉRIGAL?"

"She cannot be his wife!"

"Maybe it is a pseudonym. Perhaps she writes for the newspapers."

Mademoiselle Fifrelet's suggestion amused Madame Bigarce.

"You have some ingenious ideas," she said.

In the meantime Madame Troux came in. She had just come from church, and seemed anxious to impart what she had found out.

"Are you talking about the Parisienne?"

she said as she sat down. "Ah! well, I can tell you something worth hearing."

"Oh!"

"I have just come from the sacristy, where I have been talking to Monsieur le Curé after mass. My husband has forbidden me to have much to do with Monsieur le Curé because it may be detrimental to him if he wishes to put up for the General Council; but I said to him: 'Albert, my conscience is my conscience. You have no right to prevent me from talking to my confessor.' So, do you know what I have found out from Monsieur le Curé's very lips? Ah, well! He went to Madame Prosper and told her that he hoped that he would be able, in future, to count her among his flock. Whereupon she replied to him: 'Monsieur le Curé, I thank you, but I have no need of your help in praying to the good God. When one wants anything it is better to apply to the master rather than to an employee. I will give you five francs a month for the poor, but you must relieve me

of the necessity of confessing my sins to you, regarding which you can do nothing, and also from watching you take a wafer on a Sunday ”

“What! She said that!” exclaimed Madame Lassonge, outraged

“Is that the language of a decent married woman?” said the lawyer’s wife. “Believe me, a woman like that is capable of anything ”

“She must have a brazen tongue to tell an abbé that.”

After this edifying conversation, Mademoiselle Fifrelet took leave of Madame Bigarce. On her way home she passed the Station Café, and saw Monsieur Prosper and his wife just going out after having had an *apéritif*. She acknowledged the salute of the retired gentleman, as he raised his hat, in a very cool manner, and, prudish and sour, she thought in the depth of her wizen heart

“To please men in these days one must scoff at religion and lick over the traces . .

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Thank the Lord I shall not start that sort of thing."

And with the thought in her mind that a wicked goblin might bind her hand and foot, she hastened along the village street.

CHAPTER III

THE news that Madame Prosper was probably not Monsieur Prosper's wife spread all through La Mothe-en-Brie. It had damned the reputation of the two new-comers in the minds of the women, but it had heightened their prestige in the eyes of the majority of the men.

"And further than that?" Monsieur Troux had exclaimed at the café. "And, after all, suppose they are not married? What does it matter? One must be up to the neck in a morass of prejudice to be amazed at anything so natural. Free unions are not made for Zulus."

"No. For dogs," growled Mandibel.

The schoolmaster, who did not agree with the liberal views of the deputy mayor and the lawyer, objected with some timidity

"All the same . . . they might have made it legal."

"What! Go and say 'I will' before the mayor after having ignored him for fifteen years! Ha! Ha!"

Old Mandibel thought that absurd. He shot a jet of saliva into the sawdust-filled spittoon, and added:

"Soup after the cheese, eh? . . . Certainly not, Monsieur Lassonge. . . . We don't belong to this age. . . . We are not Parisians. If we were real Parisians, you would sleep with my wife and I should pay the same compliment to yours. . . . That's the idea! All in one bed; even the pigs know their own litter!"

The lawyer shook his head.

"Daddy Mandibel, do you think it is only in Paris where people are a bit free? . . . Why no, my good friend; when I was a lawyer at Aurillac I saw many a little illustration of provincial virtue worthy of a Fragonard."

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"And at Toulon, where I was born! And at Rouen, where I lived for five years!" murmured the deputy mayor . . . "I promise you, they could give points to Casanova"

But Daddy Mandibel was not to be convinced

"Yuz! Yuz!" he added "The more I see of men the more respect I have for the horses I shoe!"

But the time for cards had come! Monsieur Prosper arrived For two months he had regularly frequented the Station Café He had made numerous acquaintances, and now spoke with authority in his usual seat He shook hands with everybody and played with his friends

After one of the games the lawyer, who had forgotten his cigarettes, wanted to send the boy to the tobacconists'

"Do you smoke Maryland?" said Monsieur Prosper . "Here you are"

He offered his silver case to Monsieur Troux,

who, as he took a cigarette, caught sight of the inscription :

“ Oh ! . . . May I see, Monsieur Prosper ? ”

He read the inscription and smacked his lips.

“ You do yourself well. . . . Lucienne, Irma, Georgette, Charlotte. . . . Quite a harem ! ”

“ No. . . . It is a present that the customers at the *Flamant Rose* gave to me when I left. . . . ”

“ A few of the ‘ birds ’ ? ”

“ Women of the world, I should prefer to call them,” suggested Monsieur Prosper casually. . . . “ Madame Lucienne de Serjan, the Countess Irma de Saint-Missac, la Baronne Georgette Roth and Madame Charlotte Le Vasseur are not *demi-mondaines*, my dear sir.”

The lawyer, the schoolmaster and the blacksmith were silenced. Indeed, this Parisian was a somebody, there was no denying it.

“ Then . . . ” Suddenly the blacksmith

winked his eye . " And your wife?
What does she think about it? "

" Louise? She is well trained "

And on this definite statement Monsieur Prosper dealt the cards By seven o'clock he had lost fivepence halfpenny, and Monsieur Lassonge said banteringly .

" Lucky in love . Unlucky at cards "

" Quite so ! " said the lawyer as he knocked out his pipe " He has Lucienne, Irma, Georgette and Charlotte, and must he take our queens as well? That would not be fair "

The weather was fine The heat was oppressive The deputy mayor walked to his door with Monsieur Prosper, pointing out, as he arrived, that old rascal Tomato chasing a nanny-goat on the side of the road Tomato, at his master's whistle, left the goat and came with the bored expression of a good dog, and seemed to say " I? What have I done? "

Monsieur Prosper had been installed in La

Mothe-en-Brie barely six months when a sad misfortune overtook him. Louise died of embolism.

When the doctor told him that all was over, Monsieur Prosper was overcome with deep grief, and realized, very naturally, that life in La Mothe-en-Brie would be very lonely. He was no longer in love with Louise, but she had been a great companion on whom he trusted and relied, and who shared his pleasures and helped him to laugh off his first disappointments as a gardener. She was not perfect. She guided him without appearing to do so, and at times was ill-tempered and capricious. In spite of all, her companionship was helpful, and he realized that he had lost much by her sudden death.

The news spread quickly through the village. And the first thought of the people, who were hostile to the Parisian lady, was:

“Now, at last, we shall find out if she was his real wife. . . .”

The clerk at the town hall and the doctor who signed the death certificate were the first to know that the deceased was widow Mérigal. The revelation spread from house to house like a train of gun-cotton, and the lawyer's wife triumphed.

"Ah! Ah! . . . I knew I was right . . . Why, one had only to look at such a woman to see what her position was."

"I wonder," queried Mademoiselle Fifrelet, "will she be interred with the rites of the Church?"

"What do you think? After what she said to the *curé*!"

The lawyer, who was present, remarked.

"Do you think that would prevent him from taking his mass fees?"

"I think he ought to refuse his ministrations," Madame Bigarce protested. "He ought not to say mass for a woman who has been a concubine, even to the finest man in the world!"

At the word concubine, Mademoiselle Fifrelet, who had literary proclivities, conjured up the terrible orgies of Imperial Russia, and Madame Lassonge, who had read nothing beyond works of the Saints, pictured the horrors of Sodom and the debauches of Gomorrah. The mere thought that a concubine had been breathing the air of La Mothe-en-Brie shocked them and made their outraged virtuous hairs stand on end.

The funeral was fixed for the fourth of October, at eleven o'clock in the morning, and, as the lawyer had foreseen, the *curé* was moved to offer Monsieur Prosper a full mass with twenty-three lighted candles and two choir-boys in black robes. Monsieur Prosper, out of regard for his fellow-citizens, had accepted. He had sent notices of the death to his old friends in Paris, which included among them the manager of the *Flamant Rose*, although he felt quite sure that nobody would come.

On the morning of the funeral all the

notabilities of La Mothe-en-Brie, apart from several irreconcilables and several ladies who feigned diplomatic headaches, were talking in whispered voices in the garden in front of the farmhouse. The *cure*, garbed in lace and black alpaca, was on his way to the house of death, with the choir-boys trotting behind him, their fingers in their noses.

While some were whispering in the garden, and Monsieur Prosper's intimate friends were offering him their condolences, the station-master, who was upset at not being able to assist at the ceremony, was recompensed for his zeal by an unexpected sight.

Four ladies got out of the ten-fifty-four train and asked the porter the way to the church. These four elegant young ladies attracted the attention of the station-master, who, as he superintended the unloading of cheese and bicycles, admired the attractiveness and the *brio* of these gay travellers. Four Parisian ladies, for certain!

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"The church?" said the porter. . . .
"Follow the rue de la Gare and turn to the left.
You will see it on your right."

The four travellers, who were none other than Lucienne, Irma, Georgette and Charlotte, started off in pairs in that direction. They had the good taste not to show too much gaiety over this trip to the country, although it was, for them, a real day's outing. A Saturday to Monday at Deauville, Biarritz, Dieppe, with week-end lovers was nothing to a spree on their own in a real country village. The decision to come had been taken at the suggestion of Charlotte the night before, at eleven o'clock. The barman, who had just received a memorial card, suddenly said, as he mixed two sherry cobbler:

"By the way, Prosper's wife has kicked the bucket."

"No, really? Poor old Prosper!" said Lucienne sympathetically. . . . "Where did it happen? In the country where he's retired to?"

"Yes At La Mothe-en-Brie. She's to be buried to-morrow at eleven o'clock in the morning "

"Shall we go to the funeral? " Charlotte suggested at once

"Don't talk silly! " murmured Irma

"It would please good old Prosper to let him see what we thought of him Is it far from Paris, this little village of his? "

"No An hour and a half "

"Charlotte! You're a yell," said Georgette

"We could keep Prosper company when he comes back from the cemetery It would cheer him up a bit Besides, I should like to go into the country and have a real new-laid egg "

"After all, it's not a bad idea I'm hanged if I don't go too," Lucienne declared

"Yes, and so will I," said Irma "We can try some cider Bob, bring us the time-table "

They looked up the times of the trains

"We shall have to get up early The train leaves at nine-twenty-four "

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"From the Gare Montparnasse?"

"Of course not, silly; la Brie is on the Eastern line."

"Oh, you, with your rat-trap mouth, of course you'd know where the cheeses come from."

While they were joking Georgette was thinking.

"It's annoying," she said pensively. . . . "I have a friend to meet to-night. . . . It's a matter of two quid. I can't afford to let that go."

"Oh, well, don't, but slip away quietly at nine o'clock when he's asleep."

And the next morning they took the train, happy as school children on a holiday.

They got to the church just as the tail-end of the cortège was going in. They sat down quietly on the chairs at the back and followed the service without anyone noticing them.

The bomb-shell did not fall until it was over, when the congregation began to file out in

front of Monsieur Prosper, who in his black clothes walked solemnly with bent head. He had a shock when he saw the tall Charlotte. She was the first to offer her condolences. He spoke in a low voice to the others and thanked them, deeply moved that they had taken the trouble to come so far.

"You are coming to the cemetery?" he murmured.

"Naturally, Monsieur Prosper. We cannot leave you like this."

"You are too kind, all four of you. Afterwards will you come to my house? There is something to eat."

"Thank you, Monsieur Prosper. We shall be delighted."

They stepped out of the little church. The whole of La Mothe-en-Brie was amazed at seeing Monsieur Prosper surrounded by these four Parisian ladies, made up, highly perfumed, wearing black satin shoes and sombre but smart costumes. Where have they come from?



“‘You are coming to the cemetery!’ he murmured.
‘Naturally, Monsieur Prosper . . . we cannot
leave you like this.’”

Who were these beautiful strangers who suddenly appeared in the midst of these antediluvian frock-coats and old top-hats musty with age, over wrinkled faces?

There were whispers in the cortège which was formed. The bony necks of the old ladies were craned to scrutinize the four who left behind them a scent of *ambre* and verbina.

Monsieur Prosper walked in front, between Monsieur Troux and Monsieur Bigarce, his trusty friends. Monsieur Troux, who was no fool, bent over and whispered in Prosper's ear :

"The cigarette-case ladies, aren't they?"

Monsieur Prosper acquiesced. And Monsieur Troux, highly pleased, replied :

"I felt sure they were."

After the cortège had broken up at the cemetery, Monsieur Prosper beckoned the four ladies and introduced them to the lawyer and the deputy mayor.

"My good friends," he said, as he folded

the handkerchief he had been using to wipe away the tears from his eyes, "will you do me the honour of coming to lunch at my house with these ladies? You will have to take pot-luck, you know "

The lawyer and the deputy mayor were delighted To the astonishment of Irma and Georgette they addressed them as "Madame la Comtesse" and "Madame la Baronne." On the way they exercised their greatest powers of polite conversation .

Old Mathieu's wife had made an omelette and cooked a rabbit With a little Vouvray from the cellar and two dishes of fruit the lunch was quite adequate

Before sitting down to the table, the ladies went upstairs to powder their faces in Monsieur Prosper's room

"Tell us now, Monsieur Prosper," Irma inquired, with the lipstick in her fingers

"Your silly ass of a lawyer called me a countess and Georgette a baroness? Is it a joke? "

Monsieur Prosper told them about his harmless little deception.

"Ah, splendid! That's all right," exclaimed Irma. . . . "Listen, you kids, we are society ladies to-day, so I must try not to tie up my garter with my teeth."

And Georgette, rocking with laughter, sitting in an armchair, added:

"I am la Baronne Roth! Oh, lor! The funny thing is that last year I knew an old boy called Roth . . . a poor old thing . . . quite useless, God bless him!"

Monsieur Prosper calmed down their riotous hilarity, and, before going downstairs, suggested:

"Above all, behave well. . . . You know how particular people in the provinces are, my children."

"Don't worry, Monsieur Prosper," replied Charlotte. . . . "We understand the position."

As a matter of fact, the behaviour at lunch

was very correct. Until the rabbit was served the guests comported themselves as is seemly in a house where the mistress has just been taken to her last resting-place. Charlotte flirted with the lawyer. Irma and Lucienne chatted pleasantly with the deputy mayor. It was owing to an unfortunate intervention of Tomato, the dog, that things were upset.

Monsieur Prosper had just rung for Mother Mathieu to bring in the fruit and the cheese. She appeared in the doorway carrying plates and dishes. At that very instant Tomato, who had slipped into the kitchen and seized the rabbit-skin, shot like an arrow in front of Mother Mathieu, who, thrown off her balance, fell on the floor with the gruyère, pears, apples and grapes. The spectacle was too grotesque not to call forth a shout of laughter from those at table. The lawyer helped the old girl up, she was not hurt, and the ladies, shaking with laughter, picked up the scattered fruit, while Monsieur Prosper chased Tomato into the hall,

flipping his hindquarters with his serviette. This happening let loose the tongues. The solemnity which had reigned vanished.

"You've got a funny dog," exclaimed Charlotte, laughing in her handkerchief. "He looks like a rat blown up with a bicycle pump."

"It's a King Charles, isn't it?" Georgette asked ingenuously.

"A King Charles? You're potty!" replied Lucienne, highly amused. And turning to the deputy, who had been laughing, she added: "Monsieur Deputy, ever since she picked up a rich Englishman at the Gare St. Lazare, she calls every tike a King Charles."

Monsieur Prosper gave Georgette a warning glance. But he realized that he was powerless to put the birds, who had escaped, back in their cage, so with a resigned sigh he let things take their course. They took it so rapidly after the sixth bottle of Vouvray that the deputy mayor had Lucienne and Georgette on his knees and

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was offering them in turn bits of sugar dipped in brandy, while Irma leant over the lawyer's shoulder and read his future in his hand Charlotte, rather more serious than the others, chatted with Monsieur Prosper

"You gave us an astonishingly good lunch here, old boy! . Ah! It knocks spots off the ragouts at *Flamant Rose* It's real food It has a good country flavour about it "

"Yes, Charlotte . Those are the benefits of a rural life "

"Are you contented here, Prosper, old man? "

"Very contented I do a bit of gardening I breed chickens and rabbits I'm jack of all trades "

"You don't regret leaving the cabaret, I'll bet? "

"Oh, no! "

The friendly conversation between Prosper and Charlotte was interrupted by little giggles from Georgette, who, being cuddled by the

lawyer, was unfastening her white linen blouse, as she made various outrageous remarks.

It needed a severe reprimand from Charlotte to bring the "Baroness" to the ordinary rules of society. But as the Baroness was slightly inebriated, and there were peculiar circumstances, Monsieur Prosper, smiling sadly, made a sign to Charlotte to excuse her.

The lunch lasted until four o'clock. The deputy mayor and the lawyer offered to escort the ladies to the station, as it was not seemly for Monsieur Prosper to be seen walking through the streets with his guests. They kissed Monsieur Prosper affectionately as they said good-bye—gave the astonished Mother Mathieu five francs. Then they walked up the main street with Monsieur Troux and Monsieur Bigarce, who were pleased to be seen in such fine company. They caught the five-nineteen train, and were effusive in their farewells to the two notabilities, whilst the station-master watched the scene as he superintended the

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luggage The train started A bare arm waved a mauve hat outside the carriage window Monsieur Trous and Monsieur Bigarce returned the salute, and went away under the eagle eye of the amazed station-master They stopped at the level-crossing

"They're 'birds,' aren't they?" said the lawyer, winking his left eye

"Certainly not, my boy Society ladies . Ah! if you only knew . "

And he tossed his head with a superior air

Monsieur Prosper felt sure that the death of his dear companion would change the whole course of his existence He had arranged for Mother Mathieu to light the fire in the morning, to make his coffee and to keep the house in order What a difference from Louise! The rabbits went hungry for want of green stuff The chickens, badly fed, wandered into the road to pick up what they could Every week he lost two or three, stolen by tramps or

run over by cars. Tomato, put on a régime of bread and water by Mother Mathieu, who was mean, ran all over the place, and slept out like a badly brought up young man.

As to the gardening, it suffered from the irregularity of Monsieur Prosper. His zeal, as a new recruit to agriculture, had little by little cooled with the November frosts. He had no desire to rise early and get his fingers numbed by the icy wind of approaching winter. He hated the draughts from the cellar and the pools of water in front of the barn where he got his feet wet. After all, he had saved enough to live without tilling the land and sowing, like Sully Prudhomme's astonishing labourer, who could guide the plough and write an alexandrine with equal skill. Consequently he was to be seen every day, more and more, at the Station Café. To escape the loneliness at his house, he spent whole afternoons at Monsieur Bigredoux's.

In Louise's day Monsieur Prosper had never

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gone out in the evening Now solitude drove him to go after dinner to the Station Café. Not that the place was very gay One invariably met there the lamp-lighter and the platelayer, who had a drink while they waited for the last train at eleven-fifty-two, and Monsieur Bigredoux's old uncle, who sold Jaffa coffee He was a big, active man for his age He trudged fifteen miles a day, pushing his little truck, blowing a short harmonious call on his bugle, which reminded one of the "Hoyo-Toho!" of a rheumaticky Walkyre riding a cab-horse

And as Monsieur Prosper went home about ten o'clock, his coat-collar turned up, floundering in the mud or hurrying his pace to get warm by his wood fire, his face cut by the east wind, he examined the depths of his conscience and asked himself if he was really born for a country life

Had he really told the honest truth when he said to Charlotte that he loved the country?

If he was really enamoured of it, would he have dreamed, as he did more and more, of the *Flamant Rose* with its jazz and its tangoes? For in the evenings, as he slept, he no longer conjured up pictures of a prodigious harvest from his neglected kitchen garden.

He kept thinking of Montmartre, he kept seeing the silhouettes that he had been familiar with for thirty years. He inhaled no longer under his nose the sweet clean sheets washed by Mother Mathieu. He breathed once more the distant fragrance of the "birds" in the private supper-rooms, and heard the familiar laughter of the ladies who frequented the bar. He turned over under the eider-down and thought before he went to sleep :

"The razzle-dazzlers are right after all. A short life and a gay one."

And as the winter months passed by, Monsieur Prosper's longing increased, and the inhabitants of La Mothe-en-Brie were struck by his sadness, his heavy step and his

air of depression. They attributed it all to his inconsolable grief at the loss of his wife. They looked upon him as a worthy example of extra-conjugal fidelity.

Just as a small piece of metal is sufficient to put machinery out of action, an incident, trifling in itself, changed the whole course of Monsieur Prosper's life. For some considerable time he had not read the Paris papers. He was satisfied with the *Phare de Coulommiers*.

One evening the postman, by mistake, brought him a society paper that was intended for the lady at a manor-house in the neighbourhood. Having nothing to do, Monsieur Prosper turned over the pages, and his eyes fell upon an advertisement. The new proprietor of the *Flamant Rose* informs his clients that the restaurant, the ball-room and the bar have been redecorated, and that the élite of cosmopolitan society applaud every evening Bepp and Gladys.

the famous American dancers, who have come from Sherry's in New York.

So Monsieur Parmelan had also left the *Flamant Rose*. . . . Monsieur Prosper was obsessed the whole day by this announcement, and he cut it out to keep it. He was very pensive when he went to the café, and the deputy mayor said to him in a jocular manner :

“Come, my friend, you must do the right thing. . . . Your wife has been dead six months. Spring is coming. You must now take up your life once more.”

Monsieur Prosper thought over the advice of the deputy. That night he reflected for a long time with his nose under the bed-clothes. An idea came into his mind. Since Louise's death he had saved a thousand francs of his income. He determined to spend half of it on a trip to Montmartre. But this time he would treat himself by going into the *Flamant Rose* by the main door instead of by the service entrance;

he would drink a bottle of champagne instead of serving it

He did not mention his project to anyone. He waited for a suitable day. It was the second Saturday in May. This early spring the weather was mild. The sun was bringing out the buds. At six o'clock he went to his room, took out his clothes and brushed them carefully. He put five hundred francs in his pocket-book, locked the door, turned up the collar of his overcoat and hurried to the station. He had the appearance of a camouflaged criminal bent upon a serious job. He escaped the notice of Monsieur Lassonge, but came face to face with Daddy Mandibel, who scrutinized him suspiciously.

"Hallo, Monsieur Prosper! . . . Are you going on a journey?"

"No! Only to Paris until to-morrow."

Old Mandibel, who had the eye of a detective, added.

"But you are in evening dress?"

"I am going to a cousin's wedding dinner.
. . . A bit of a nuisance!"

And he passed through the turnstile at the level-crossing.

From ten o'clock in the evening Monsieur Prosper wandered in the neighbourhood of the Place Pigalle. He drank in the Montmartre air. In slowly re-accustoming himself to it he experienced great enjoyment. Ah! how good it was to see once again these familiar surroundings; above all, to see them as a man in the street, free from all restraint. He had money. Louise was no longer there to check him, to upbraid him and spoil his pleasure. Later on at the *Flamant Rose* they would take him for an ordinary customer. He would be on an equality with the people who used to give him tips. Life was still enjoyable; it had been a mistake to stagnate so long in retirement.

He made a theatrical entrance into the bar.

He expected to be hailed like Napoleon returning from Elba. But Monsieur Parmelan's chief of staff had left. Not only was the personnel changed, but the customers were different. He sat down at a table. A waiter, who was unaware that he was waiting on a famous colleague, attended to him in an off-hand manner, as he served him an *assiette Anglaise* and a bottle of stout. Over on the left, in the dining-room where in the golden days he used to preside, another *maitre d'hôtel* reigned. Monsieur Prosper watched him like a connoisseur. His young rival was tall and thin, with stilted movements and a blasé air. He treated his clients in a free and easy manner, and appeared as if his mind was occupied with other things.

"What a come down!" said Monsieur Prosper to himself. "Look at the new customers! It does not matter whether the clients are eating potato salad or truffled turkey, they don't care a hang! Ah! la! la!"

The evening which had promised such delight opened badly. Suddenly a smile lit up his face. Charlotte came into the bar.

"Monsieur Prosper!" she said, amazed.

"Why, yes, it's me all right, Charlotte . . . here I am . . . come and sit down."

She sat down beside him. She was wearing jade green crêpe de Chine with a black hat. Although rather bony, she was attractive, with her firm bosom, her dead white skin and her velvety eyes, reddish-brown in colour.

"Joking apart," she said, "you've come up for a spree?"

"Yes, I had that mad longing."

"You're not *enceinte*?"

"No! I'm fed up with La Mothe-en-Brie. I felt I must come and have a look at the cabaret."

"It has altered since your time. Monsieur Parmelan has retired. Bob and most of the staff have gone to the *Troglodytes Bar*, a very

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good place . . . You must come, you'll find yourself at home there Call the waiter and let's go "

They brought Monsieur Prosper his bill

"What!" said Charlotte, astounded
"You're not going to pay forty-five francs for two slices of sausage and a bit of cold meat. Send for your successor."

The *maitre d'hôtel* with the blasé air shook Monsieur Prosper's hand in a flabby manner, and told him that the new management were very strict, and in the end took five francs off the bill Monsieur Prosper paid Charlotte exclaimed in a loud voice that she would never set foot in the place again, and they started off to the *Troglodytes Bar*

A pleasant surprise awaited them Irma, Lucienne, Georgette, Bob the barman, the cloakroom lady and the page, made a tremendous fuss of him, and surrounded him as if he were a prodigal son

"Would you believe it?—he was hanging

around the *Flamant Rose* with a face as long as a wet week. If it hadn't been for me, you'd never have seen him."

Monsieur Prosper beamed with pleasure. There, at any rate, he was recognized with double prestige: as a former *maître d'hôtel* and a retired gentleman. He created the impression of being a wealthy man; the ladies sat at his table and reminded him of things that happened at the *Flamant Rose*.

The American customers on the other side of the room, the clients with their iced champagne, gazed at this fortunate fellow who was being made such a fuss of, and whispered the names of well-known persons.

Georgette, who was, as usual, slightly intoxicated, threw her arm round his neck, and said:

"Would you believe it?—your friend Trous has written to me every week since the famous luncheon party. Regular schoolboy love-letters, my dear old boy!"

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"The sly dog! He doesn't boast about it down there"

Up till two o'clock in the morning Monsieur Prosper enjoyed himself to his heart's content. Ah! how good it was to breathe this atmosphere, to listen to the twanging tremolos of the banjo that seem to tickle you in the pit of the stomach, to put his arm round Charlotte, who was sitting next to him. Her friends had disappeared one after the other. Irma had gone with her prize-fighter. Georgette, drunk as an owl, had been taken off by a weedy young man in a high-powered car, who owned diamond mines.

Lucienne was busy leading on two Americans at the far end, promising to take them to the seventh heaven of delight.

These women who looked upon love as a business, these men who gambled with love like punters at a race-course, hoping that *Vertige* would win and *Frisson* would be placed, all these people made Monsieur Prosper

envious. His cloister-like ideas of life broke down and his brain began to whirl. Suddenly, when Charlotte least expected it, he fondled her bare arm with his great hand and whispered in a forced voice :

“I say. . . . It is strange that we two, ever since we have known one another, have never . . .”

His suggestion made Charlotte laugh. Looking at him from a new point of view, she criticized him in that strange way that women do when they consider men with such an idea in their minds. After all, this sexagenarian was a presentable and well-set-up person, more attractive than many a young man. If he was in love with her why should she refuse him?

“You want to make up for lost time, you old rascal?” she said as she played with the straw in her *menthe à l'eau*.

“It is never too late to go wrong.”

“Very well, I’m game.”

Ten minutes later, arm in arm, they crossed Vintimille Square and reached Charlotte's furnished rooms

Monsieur Prosper was in a happy frame of mind as he watched Charlotte cast aside her jade green dress. He thought her beautiful in her *déshabille*.

Monsieur Prosper slept peacefully. He had stepped over the traces for the first time Louise Mérigal's faithful lover had made use of his liberty to some purpose. And Charlotte's kisses seemed sweet after Louise's harelip. He wondered if he had been stupid to remain faithful so long to her memory. He awoke Charlotte. She seemed surprised.

The daylight filtered through the gaps in the curtains and threw upon the bed a cold light, which accentuated the dark rings round the girl's eyes and the tired lines round her mouth. She was very kindly disposed towards Monsieur Prosper, but her mind wandered, and she made

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The daylight filtered through the gaps in the curtains and threw upon the bed a cold light, which accentuated the dark rings round the girl's eyes and the tired lines round her mouth. She was very kindly disposed towards Monsieur Prosper, but her mind wandered, and she made

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a mental calculation of the sums she had received since the first of the month. She thought she might be able to afford the white fox fur that she had set her heart on. She remembered that she still owed a hundred and eighty francs to the cleaners.

At eleven o'clock Monsieur Prosper was dressed and thought things over, while Charlotte gave orders to her charwoman in the kitchen. Ought he to make Charlotte a present? Would she be offended if he offered her money? Owing to her kindly attitude towards him he was inclined to think she would take offence. Suddenly he had a brain-wave. When she came in he would put his hand to his inside pocket as if he were going to take out his pocket-book. If she exclaimed immediately: "Prosper!" in a tone of affectionate reproach, he would say that he was searching for his handkerchief. If she treated it in an ordinary way he would offer her five louis.

Charlotte came back. Monsieur Prosper

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slowly put his hand to his pocket and watched Charlotte's eyes. She looked at him without saying anything. Astonished at seeing him fixed in this attitude, she asked him casually

"What's the matter? Rheumatism in the shoulder?"

"No, my dearest Charlotte, I wanted to give you a little memento of our love."

"Money! You are joking, my dear. I don't want this to be a money business between us."

He took her in his arms

"All the same, Charlotte. I should love to give you a trinket of some sort as a souvenir of last night."

"Ah! well, as you wish it, we'll go out and you can buy me a geegaw that I have set my heart on."

Half an hour later she took him to a little furrier in the rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, and showed him the white fox of her dreams



"At eleven o'clock Monsieur Prosper was dressed."

Four hundred and fifty francs. Monsieur Prosper was a little taken aback.

“Do not be alarmed at the price. I know how to make a bargain. I shall get it for five louis less than that.”

The furrier let the fox go for four hundred and twenty-five francs. Beaming with delight, Charlotte got into the taxi and playfully put the handsome fur round Monsieur Prosper's neck.

She said good-bye to him at her door, as she had an appointment with a Spaniard who was going to take her to the races, and kissed Monsieur Prosper on the mouth with her carmine lips, whispering :

“You are a darling! Come and see me again. I would give up Rockefeller for you, because you appeal to me.”

At that moment Monsieur Prosper forgot that he only had seven francs and his return ticket left in his pocket-book. He made his way back to the Gare de l'Est, tumbling into

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the taxi to which Charlotte's perfume still clung, and he conjured up a picture of her beautiful bosoms, like a pair of white doves caught in the dainty black lace of her underwear

CHAPTER IV

THE guide who points out the most interesting objects to amazed tourists, after a time looks at them himself with an indifferent eye. The actor who spends much of his life in the wings does not feel the singular attraction that they exercise over the ordinary person. The imperturbable *maître d'hôtel*, who presides over the nightly round, under the glare of the lights at the cabaret, finds no pleasure there, and is ready to hasten away. So long as Monsieur Prosper had lived this life in his professional capacity, so long as it was his business; Louise had no difficulty in keeping him out of temptation. He could have compromised himself with gallant ladies, indulged in all sorts of wild orgies, made use of his spare moments, and dealt shadily in jewels. He abstained because he loved his profession. He had rubbed

shoulders with all manner of vices, absolutely without getting tainted. But since that unforgettable night he had spent with Charlotte, since Louise was no longer there to give him advice, he had grown bored at La Mothe-en-Brie, and continued to think of Paradise Lost.

In a melancholy frame of mind, he paced up and down his garden paths, repeating to himself "Have I been idiot enough not to have made use of my opportunities all this time?" And mentally he compared the delights that he desired for himself with the boring monotony of his present mode of life.

To tell the truth, he was getting weary of those interminable games of cards at the Station Café, those hackneyed jokes cracked by Monsieur Lassonge, and Monsieur Troux's long-winded cackle. He shrugged his shoulders as he gazed at his miserable little radishes and his stunted carrots, the result of his careful and scientific horti-

culture. Tomato's pranks no longer amused him. Mother Mathieu, when she brought him his morning coffee, seemed to enjoy repeating the idle village gossip, chewing it over and over again with her toothless gums, and it got on his nerves. Every day he was obsessed by the recollection of Charlotte, with her dainty underwear and her satin-like skin. For four whole weeks he resisted; he fought against Desire prowling at night in his room, strolling about in his garden, suddenly rearing its head at the foot of his bed, ready to play the tender sonata of rumpled skirts, stolen kisses, loving sighs, gallant whispers, trills of delightful voluptuousness and pizzicati of tingling nerves. Desire, the libertine torturer, vanished, then suddenly returned. His invisible hand passed over the sleeper's skin, giving, to irrepressible dreams, fleeting visions of lost embraces, an alluring chaos of perfumed lingerie under a Dantesque saraband of sex appeal.

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

One afternoon in June, aphrodisiac and soft as the tremor of a nubile virgin, he confessed himself vanquished, packed his suitcase and took the train to Paris

"I shall be back the day after to-morrow," he told Mother Mathieu, who was washing up the dishes and chewing a piece of salt bacon—her great enjoyment "Do not forget to give the rabbits some green-stuff, and water the cabbage plants well "

During the journey he looked forward to the pleasure of seeing Charlotte, and, as he lolled back in his corner, he looked at his fellow-travellers, thinking :

"These idiots have little idea that in Paris I know a pretty woman who is enamoured of me "

He made his way to the rue Victor Massé, and put up at a little hotel, the *Mondial Palace*, where he was surprised to find that Monsieur Jacobèze, a former cellarman at the *Flamant Rose*, was the landlord His



“These idiots have little idea that in Paris I know a pretty woman who is enamoured of me.”

colleague greeted him warmly, and drank a glass of syrupy white wine with him in his office. He told him all about his present life, finishing up with :

“ You see, my boy, I’m bored to death down there. I’ve worked hard for thirty years, so I have earned a little recreation. With my savings I can afford a few extras. It is due to me.”

“ And you’re damn well right ! Good gait, clear eye, straight legs, and your purse full ? Why do you hesitate ? ”

“ Especially as Charlotte appeals to me. . . . You remember Charlotte ? ”

“ The one who chews up franc-notes when she’s tight ? ”

“ Yes. She’s all over me. Showed it the other night, no humbug.”

“ Lucky dog ! ”

“ So to-night I’m going to look for her at the *Troglodytes Bar*, and ‘ Once aboard the lugger and the girl is mine ’ ! ”

Monsieur Prosper made his way to the

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Troglodytes Bar, but was surprised when by midnight Charlotte had not turned up. He had been received in a very friendly fashion. He began to like this quiet little bar, where the jazz-band was replaced by a plaintive banjoist, assisted by a mandolin-player who sold tips for Auteuil. A little woman, whom he did not know, suddenly sat next to him, and said in a confidential whisper:

"I know who you are, M'sieu. You used to be the *maître d'hôtel* at the *Flamant Rose*. I've often heard talk of you. One of my old friends, Tom Bird, a chap who sells pearls, has often said nice things about you."

Monsieur Prosper, flattered and pleased, replied:

"Tom Bird! Oh, yes! What has become of him?"

"He's in quod . . . a spot of trouble with an American lady . . . Tom Bird is a nice crook . . . By the way, are you looking for

Charlotte? . . . She is not coming in this evening. She's gone to Barbizon with a new boy. An artist who paints with fruit juice on packing paper. He has shown his pictures at the *Indépendants*, but you can never see his pictures properly, they are always covered with flies."

The shrill voice and the tired face of this little sandy-haired woman amused Monsieur Prosper. He asked her her name.

"Minoute," she said as she blew into the air the paper cover off a straw. "I'm nineteen, all my teeth, good figure, a birthmark on my left arm, and an Angora cat that I call Ursula. She scratches my customers when she does not like their faces."

At one o'clock Monsieur Prosper took Minoute to the *Mondial Palace*. His friend Jacobèze was still in his office. He took him aside and whispered:

"You don't mind if I take this little 'bird' up to my room?"

"Not I Not I . . . You can take half a dozen . Life is short . . The only thing I ask is don't sing the *Marseillaise* in the middle of the night, and don't make holes in the walls . . . Every month I spend fifteen francs in plaster filling them up If I didn't my hotel would become a sieve."

Minoute was the living antithesis of Charlotte With her red hair, her turned-up nose, her greenish coloured eyes, she was really amusing, as she chattered away to her heart's content

Monsieur Prosper found her more alluring than any woman he had ever known, and after a while he sat her on his knee, like a golliwog, and he asked her all sorts of questions

"My dear boy!" she said "My idea of life is as simple as A, B, C. I want to carry on as I am till I'm thirty, of course, you understand, putting a nice bit of 'dough' in my stocking And then when I have saved enough I'll buy a sweet shop in Bordeaux or



“The shrill voice and the tired face of this sandy haired woman amused Monsieur Prosper.”

Marseilles, and I shall marry a man who makes *marron glacé*. I have a commercial mind. They take me for a little fool, who thinks of nothing but monkeying about and so on . . . but, my dear, my friends make a mistake. You can look a long time before you find a kid of my age who can quote the prices of de Beers and Royal Dutch! ”

“Bravo, Minoute! . . . You take an interest in the prices of the Stock Market.”

“Rather! . . . But as we’re talking of my plans, I’ve just got an idea. Most girls have a gigolo who skins ’em to the bone. . . . I’m not one of those, I promise you; I’ve no use for the young fellows who take your bits and pieces, and who cut a dash with them into the bargain. I’m not buying them silk shirts, I can tell you. I know a game worth two of that. I try to get hold of a gigolo, not too young, who knows something about business, and who can advise me regarding my little investments. Someone like you who under-

stands business and the ways of the Place Pigalle. You could put me wise!"

The suggestion surprised Monsieur Prosper, but it rather appealed to him. Minouette seemed very attractive, and he made a mental vow to see her again and continue this charming prologue.

"I did not expect you to suggest that," he said, laughing. "For you must confess it is a difficult job even for a serious and steady man."

"No. An irresponsible youngster would never be able to do it. It needs, on the contrary, a well balanced and successful sort of person."

She snuggled down beside him, and added.

"You'll see, darling. It will be very amusing. I will show you my account book with its pay-ins and pay-outs. Sometimes I put the debits to the credits. So you must correct me. And I'll show you my pocket-book: five War Bonds. Twelve preference shares six per cent Algerian Tramways. . . It was

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a Tunis olive merchant who recommended them. . . . A regular rotter! . . . They've dropped thirty francs. . . . And four shares in Pithiviers United. . . . A very good investment. They make faggots. . . . That brings in nine per cent. I bought them below par. . . . At the end of the month I expect the Viscount will give me two thousand francs, so you can tell me what I ought to buy. I read that Cape Vert coal-mines are making a new issue. . . . But I don't think much of Cape Vert coal-mines. . . ."

"Who is the Viscount, Minoute?"

"His name is Dupont. He is a small-arms manufacturer in the rue Lafayette, very rich."

"But why 'Viscount'?"

"It's my charwoman who calls him that, because he has guns on his note-paper. She thinks they are a coat of arms. Do you really think that Cape Vert mines are . . . ?"

They talked in this way far into the sultry

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night These walls, which had so often heard coarse conversation, resounded now with a discussion such as is heard on the steps and portico of the Bourse At last the dawn came

"So you'll do it for me," she said as she was dressing, about noon "I can rely on you And if you prevent me from making any bloomers, I will be very nice to you, you'll see"

When she had gone, Monsieur Prosper thought things over The adventure began to interest him The part that Minoute wanted him to play had its attractions He got up, contented, with a smile on his face Life was enjoyable and the sun shone As he went down to Monsieur Jacobèze's office he met a young woman in a *peignoir* carrying a bottle of milk, sobbing He asked her what her trouble was The young woman raised her eyes like a romantic virgin and replied, sniffing

"All I can say is men are pigs, Monsieur! Last night I picked up a man in the Place du

Havre. . . . I brought him here. He asked me this morning: 'How much do you want?' I told him: 'Thirty francs.' I'm worth that, aren't I? . . . Then I altered my mind, and I said to him: 'Pay a week's rent to Daddy Jacobèze, that's about the same thing.' . . . He went down. Worried because he did not come back, I followed him, and Daddy Jacobèze tells me that he's done a bunk. . . . My word, it's a dirty trick! It makes one sick! . . . Just think, I used a clean pair of sheets! "

The young woman wiped her eyes, and added broken-heartedly:

"After all, I'm only a poor girl. I take on a young fellow and that's what I get. . . . In future I shall carry on like Fernande. . . . A smile when they come in and a kick in the pants when they go out. That's all they deserve! "

Monsieur Prosper, who was not in the mood to see a woman crying, said in a lordly manner

to his neighbour that he would pay her week's rent at the office. She immediately forgot her bitter feelings, dried her eyes, and took Monsieur Prosper to her room, where she got dressed at once to go and have lunch with him.

When Monsieur Jacobèze saw him come in with Mademoiselle Marthe, the tenant of No. 18, he winked his eye and whispered in Monsieur Prosper's ear.

"My word. You're a goer, you are!"

"I'm trying to make up for lost time, my dear boy."

"And catching it up at the end of the passage."

Mademoiselle's pessimism vanished during lunch. She showed her gratitude, and thought better of humanity as a whole under the influence of a man of means who was sowing his wild oats like a youth let loose. At seven o'clock, while they were chatting in the twilight of the beautiful warm evening, someone knocked at the door. Mademoiselle Marthe

seemed annoyed. She had a young friend who came to see her from time to time. He respected her because he thought she was a hard-working typist. She was chagrined to think that this young idealist should find her in this compromising position with an elderly man. She called out :

“Is that you, Serge?”

“Why no, you duffer!” said a drawling voice. “It’s Boudin Rose.”

“All right, come in.”

Reassured, Marthe opened the door and introduced her friend.

“Monsieur Prosper . . . Mademoiselle Boudin Rose.”

Mademoiselle Boudin Rose was a native of Picardy, plump as a sausage. She had been called Boudin Rose on account of her *embon-point*, which attracted certain dilettanti. She knew Monsieur Prosper’s reputation.

“I am very highly honoured at meeting you this evening, Monsieur Prosper,” she said with

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exquisite courtesy "I have often heard tell of your love of good living As for myself, I love anything that guzzles, and I think more of you for it "

Monsieur Prosper did not wish to be backward in politeness, so replied

"Mademoiselle, the love of good eating forms a bond of sympathy between people, like the Cross and the Crescent."

And Boudin Rose, who had no thought of Christ or Mahomet, exclaimed in reply .

"Quite right, a good hot-cross bun with butter is a winner every time "

In the dying light of the room they passed a happy time

As eight o'clock struck, someone knocked at the door

Marthe, in a weary voice, called out

"Who is it? "

"It's me, Serge . "

Marthe got up in a hurry, put on her hat and *peignoir*, then she whispered .

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"I have let my room to you . . . you understand, eh? "

She opened the door to *Monsieur Serge*.

He was a tall young fellow, slightly round-shouldered, with a long nose, and was wearing pince-nez with a ribbon attached; his cheeks and forehead were spotty. He was a student of philosophy, and, although he did not admit it, he had never overstepped the traces with loose women.

One day he had modestly offered *Marthe* a bunch of violets, deceived by her Madonna-like face. He had taken her to dinner from time to time, without ever thinking of anything more, without ever suggesting any ulterior motive.

"*Monsieur Serge Albinois*," said *Marthe* to *Monsieur Prosper* and *Boudin Rose*, who were on the bed. . . .

The student of philosophy bowed politely. Although his acquaintance with *Sextus Empiricus* and *Empedocles* ought to have made

him more sceptical, he was amazed that an orphan so circumspect should have an elderly gentleman and a loose woman in her room. But his amazement vanished when Marthe explained the situation.

"My dear little Serge," she said in a soft voice, "do not scold me. Boudin Rose is a friend who used to be in my office, and she asked me to lend her my room this afternoon.

She wanted to consult Monsieur Prosper, who is an expert on stock exchange matters.

You understand?"

"I quite see, Mademoiselle Marthe."

When the ice was broken, Monsieur Prosper suggested that they should all four go out to dinner. Monsieur Serge agreed, and turned to the wall whilst Boudin Rose dressed herself. They went down, and as they passed Monsieur Jacobèze, he gave a whistle of admiration when he saw Monsieur Prosper going out with Boudin Rose on his arm.

"Never two without three, old boy," he

said. . . . "If you go on like this I shall give you a slate to chalk 'em up."

Monsieur Prosper gave a free and easy wave of the hand like a hussar on the spree, and went out with his hat at a rakish angle. The dinner was one long laugh. Monsieur Prosper had never enjoyed himself so much.

"Let's wet the sausage," Boudin Rose whispered in his ear.

Monsieur Prosper agreed, and ordered two bottles of *Asti Spumante*.

The young philosopher, who usually wetted his syllogisms with plenty of plain water, slid little by little on the toboggan of intoxication. Leaning against Marthe, his pince-nez askew, his glass in his hand, he cracked jokes.

"Look, my dear. . . . The *Asti* flows like Monsieur Bergson's words, and sparkles in my subconsciousness like an imperative paregoric. . . . I am now a *man*, a platonically minded man, and I follow the absolute with the thread

of pure reasoning *Cogito sur mes ergots*
 Cocoricol! "

Boudin Rose nudged Monsieur Prosper's knee, and suggested

"He's tight We'd better put him to
bed in Marthe's room . . ."

At eleven o'clock the student of philosophy was poking for his glasses in the ice-pail with the handle of an umbrella, and Marthe and Boudin Rose were leaning against Monsieur Prosper's chest roaring with laughter. They returned to the *Mondial Palace*. On the way Monsieur Serge hung on to Monsieur Prosper's arm, and discussed Eleatics in a ribald manner. He was not surprised to find himself eventually in Marthe's room, and only protested feebly when Boudin Rose unfastened his tie.

"*Oculos habent et non videbunt,*" he muttered waggishly.

"Let my two *oculos* alone and attend to what you are doing," said Boudin Rose.

It was a night that Monsieur Lassonge

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would have described as orgiac, and that Mademoiselle Fifrelet would have thought worthy of the Lupercals of the Second Empire. The unexpected initiation of Monsieur Serge would have been a suitable subject for a Hogarth, and highly amused Boudin Rose and Monsieur Prosper. Because the young philosopher neighed like a colt let loose, and called Hegel and Count August to witness the height of happiness. Never had there been such goings-on on the third floor of the *Mondial Palace*. Monsieur Jacobèze, who slept with his wife in a room above, was awakened in the middle of the night, and said to Madame Jacobèze:

"It's Prosper making that row up there. Would you believe it? . . . A man so circum-spect when he worked at the *Flamant Rose*."

The next day about noon, Monsieur Prosper went back to his room and recollected suddenly that he owned a house at La Mothe-en-Brie,

with a dog, fowls and vegetables. He had not the faintest desire to see Mother Mathieu again and hear the clicking of her gums like nut-crackers. He was rather tired, but very pleased with life.

This *Mondial Palace*, which in the morning smelt of hot coffee, eau-de-Cologne and stale smoke, in the afternoon was full of little ladies making their toilette, and at night harboured in each of its rooms happy couples, this *Mondial Palace* attracted him like a flowery oasis after a long journey through the desert. How could one be dull when, in the evening, the tenants in *déshabille* chatted in the passages; when the old floor waiter, down at heel, slouched through the doors, his arms full of sandwiches and bottles, when his neighbour sang *Madame Butterfly* as she dressed, or trilled with joy as she undressed? Monsieur Prosper, who ought to have returned to his village that day, put off his departure until the next. Minoute came to see him, and asked

him to accompany her to the Cr dit de France to help her with a strong-box. The next day it was Marthe who woke him up at nine o'clock. The young woman with the innocent eyes of a romantic virgin told him her troubles. . . .

In order to distract his neighbour from her misfortunes, Monsieur Prosper postponed his departure, and finished up the evening at the *Troglodytes* with Marthe and Boudin Rose. When he passed Monsieur Jacob ze's office, the ex-cellarman remarked to his wife :

"You see that old rogue? . . . He must have been a changeling. . . . When I knew him at the *Flamant Rose* he was impervious to the advances of the girls, and a stickler for correct behaviour. He was well looked after by his woman, and was most particular as to what he did. Since he has retired to the suburbs he thinks of nothing but having a game. . . . He's beginning too late."

After a week's absence Monsieur Prosper

returned to La Mothe-en-Brie, as he had come to the end of his money. He had dipped into his second half-year's income. He got an advance of three thousand francs from the bank on the plea of domestic troubles, and once more left his house to go back to the *Mondial Palace*.

The day after he returned to the hotel, the second-floor waiter, Emule, who slouched along in his old slippers and picked up the cigarette-ends lying in the corners with a pin on the end of a stick, knocked at his door, and said

"Monsieur Prosper . . . There is a young man who wants to speak to you."

"Who is it?"

"Mademoiselle Marthe's lover. . . . You know, the young man with glasses who looks a little mouldy."

"Show him up."

Monsieur Serge came into the room and shook hands effusively with Monsieur Prosper

He undid his coat, sat down on the edge of the bed, and said :

“ Ah ! Monsieur. . . . I am very pleased to find you have returned. . . . I have missed you since you went away. . . . Yes ! Yes ! ever since we spent that delightful time together, with Marthe and Boudin Rose, I have been wanting to repeat the experiment ; unfortunately Marthe has given me the go-by, and I dare not risk myself alone with other women. You know them ; advise me, like a good uncle. . . . ”

Monsieur Serge's position was pathetic. Monsieur Prosper questioned him, and gathered that this philosopher had found supreme happiness. Since his experience he had neglected Kant for Epicurus, and had decked the cold figure of Relativity with rose-coloured crêpe de Chine.

“ You can understand,” he explained, as he rubbed his glasses, “ my thesis on non-existence is petering out while I am awaiting Contin-

gency Whilst I was a greenhorn in these matters, I was able to content myself with monads and suck the cocktail of Pragmatism through a straw. . Now, as soon as I awake, I long to enjoy those pleasures I am restless, Monsieur Prosper . I am restless with impatience, and wish to explore the delights Don't you know of a little 'bird' with whom I can—er—turn over the pages of the Decameron? ”

That very evening the philosopher and the gentleman of property took their onion soup together at Mother Raoul's, and discussed the basic facts of their common destiny

“That little outing has brought us together and made us friendly,” observed Monsieur Prosper, drawing patterns with his cheese-knife on his plate “For you it is the prologue, for me the epilogue . That is strange, isn't it? It shows that the beast that lies dormant in us can sleep for sixty years or growl in the trough of voluptuousness at twenty-two . . .

Look at that little 'bit of goods' over there on the left with that old man. She is the sister of a very smart *grue* who used to come to supper at the *Flamant Rose* with an under-Secretary from the Home Office. She used to sell flowers to our customers, until one day when her elder sister called her to the bar, and shouted at her in a rage: 'You dirty little cat! You ought to be ashamed of yourself hawking your "cabbages" in front of my lovers . . . just clear out, and look sharp about it.'"

Monsieur Serge drank in his mentor's remarks. He certainly had neither the elegant appearance of a Telemachus nor a spotlessly white shirt nor a well-shaped figure. Monsieur Serge's shirt, mauve with yellow stripes, had not been laundered by the young ladies of the Peloponesus, and his studious and prominent nose did not make one think of Attic beauty. But he followed in the footsteps of the hero of Fénelon in his eager desire to profit by the lessons of this experienced old gentleman.

"Virginity," he said to Monsieur Prosper, "is a heavy burden on a man's shoulders. I came to that conclusion when I deposited its heavy load in Marthe's hands. . . . I speak figuratively, of course, and I hope you will not take offence at my rhetoric."

"Certainly not, Monsieur Serge. Pass me the mustard, if you please."

"Well, there . . . you probably look upon me as a cynic, but I promise you that after serious consideration I feel sure that I was born under the planet Venus. . . . Nietzsche, if he had known me, would have classed me among the followers of Dionysus."

"As a matter of fact, my boy, can you afford to go on the spree?"

"I have enough to pay, if needs be, for a night out. My Uncle Casimir, who lives in retirement at Poitou, sends me two thousand francs a month."

Minoute appeared and put an end to the conversation. She kissed her financial adviser

and sat down at their table. While Monsieur Serge got up to go and pay her taxi, Minoute asked :

“Is this your natural son, this miserable specimen? ”

“No, Minoute. He is a Dionysiad.”

“What’s that? Some kind of fossil? That does not surprise me. Anyway, he has a freak’s head and a nose like a sheep’s tail.”

Monsieur Serge came back and sat down. Without delay he pressed his two feet on Minoute’s shoe. Minoute, furious, gave him a hack on the shin.

“She is charming, your friend,” said Serge. “I could eat her up this evening, after midnight.”

“I’d rather break my neck than have children by you, my good sir,” retorted Minoute. “I’ve no wish to present them to a museum or to put them in spirits of wine.”

“She is charming and so caustic in her wit,”

the philosopher replied " She reminds me of Abbé Coudillac's theory She hides her thorns under seductive formulæ "

His hand, under the table, patted Minoute's right knee, and Minoute, irritated, pricked him surreptitiously with a dessert-knife Between the cherries and the cheese, while Monsieur Serge went to telephone, Minoute declared to Monsieur Prosper .

" He annoys me, this bookworm . He swanks because he has studied metaphysics and knows a bit about them He would do better if he improved his physique with a course of physic "

" He's a peculiar person, Minoute. He was a good boy until a week ago Until he had met me he had never side-slipped But he will do it again, in spite of his looks He has the wherewithal "

" He has money? "

" Yes And he is ready to sacrifice some of it on the altar of pleasure, at a price."

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“You mean it! But why on earth didn’t you tell me that before. . . . He is quite entertaining, your friend, and his ugliness has its attraction. . . . Really, you are too bad. Here is a friend from whom I could replenish my purse, and you would have let the chance go by. . . . My dear old boy, you have as much gumption as a tom-cat. . . . You can now oblige me by peeling my apple. We must get twenty-four louis. Do you understand?”

And what is written in the Great Book concerning weak men came to pass. That evening, Monsieur Serge, philosopher, and Mademoiselle Minoute, courtesan, made love to one another. And Monsieur Prosper sought out Marthe, who gazed upon him with her romantic blue eyes, but he felt in a vague sort of way that he had played a doubtful game as regards Minoute and Serge.

“You see,” said Minoute gaily next day to Monsieur Prosper, who was reading in bed,

"one must look at things in the right perspective. Your spectacled, lymphatic friend seemed to me, at first sight, dull and weedy . . . It is true that his eyes are the colour of dishwater, and he has narrow shoulders that were not made to carry me off by force, but I have taken more careful stock of him, and I find that he has the nose of a Bourbon, his forehead is worthy of Rodin's *Penseur*, and his bandy legs are like those of a gentleman-rider in an English print.

"I've done well. I've procured five hundred francs that I want you to invest immediately in six per cent Batavian Rubber shares. I met a Dutchman last week in the cloak-room at the *Troglodytes* who told me that they would go up in value. Try and get them below the quoted price, free of all extra charges . . ."

She bent over Prosper and cuddled him Ah! that Minoute. What a droll little person

. . . She soon got her own way. Under her

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green eyes his conscience slept and his principles vanished. He banished all thoughts of his past spotless life; he would revel in his fall from virtue, and he was content to become a regular old roué.

CHAPTER V

THIS evening the anniversary of the opening of the *Troglodytes Bar* was being celebrated. Tired of dancing shimmies, twanged by the weary fingers of the mandolinist-bookmaker and the blasé banjoist, Charlotte was sitting in front of the mirror in the ladies' cloak-room powdering herself to the roots of her hair, while the attendant, Madame Cuvilange, held the powder-box. Charlotte, noticing a pigskin bag standing against the wall, asked :

"Are you going away, Madame Cuvilange?"

"No. Monsieur Prosper has begged me to take care of it for him this evening."

"What! Prosper of the *Flamant Rose*?"

Why, what has become of him?
I've lost sight of him since I've been away from Paris all this time."

Madame Cuvilange folded her hands under her lamb's wool cross-over and sighed.

"Ah! It is a pity to see that sort of thing."

"Poor old Prosper is in trouble?"

"Well, he's hunting for it. . . . When I think how comfortable he could have been on his income. . . . His house in the country . . . his plot of land . . . his fowls. . . . All gone in less than a year. . . . It's very sad!"

"How has it happened?"

"Going on the spree has done it. He's frittered away his capital. He has sold his place, and now, as you may imagine, he's on his uppers. He does odd jobs at night and sleeps during the day. It upsets me to see a decent fellow end up by cadging off women."

"No! Really?"

"Unfortunately what I tell you is true. You know that in the old days one dare not suggest anything off the square to him. He would have sent you about your business. Ah! there, Ma'me Charlotte, he suddenly broke

loose and soon came to grief. . . He began with Minoute, the little baggage. . .

"The girl who drinks kummel with ether?"

"Yes! But she's no fool. She got Monsieur Prosper to invest her money for her, and though she drinks like a fish, the little rat, she never forgets that two and two make four, and she speculates like an old money-lender. In short, Monsieur Prosper invested her money for her, and she was so pleased about it that she has spoken about him to her pals. One called Emulienne, and little Léontine of the *Cigale*, entrusted their savings to him, and he also became these girls' gigolo."

"No! At his time of life."

"I think he put them wise and gave them a love of money. As for Monsieur Prosper, he lost their savings for them, and they threatened to summons him. So he had to sell his house, and now he hasn't a sou."

"Poor blighter!"

"I myself have known worn-out and elderly

men who have gone wild. They only think of going on the loose when they ought to go home to their slippers. . . . Ah! Ma'me Charlotte, the world is very wicked. . . . Here is a clean towel for you. . . ."

Suddenly shrieks of laughter came from the telephone-box, and sounds of slaps.

"It's nothing," explained Madame Cuvilage in the quiet tone of a very blasé woman. . . . "Léa and Denise are dividing out a little morphia that Bob has brought. . . ."

A client who wanted to use the telephone opened the door and grumbled at the two antagonists:

"You are in the way, my girls. . . . Go and do your dirty business elsewhere. I want to use this box."

Charlotte went back to the bar. She stopped, astonished, as she saw sitting near the door, Monsieur Prosper, nibbling salted almonds, with his elbows on the check cloth. She was amazed to see him so aged, so unkempt

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and wearing such dirty linen. What a difference from the smart retired gentleman, well-groomed in a well-cut dress suit, whom she had met the previous spring-time under the glare of the *Flamant Rose*. Her first impulse was to go away. Then she thought it would be a poor thing, considering the olden days, to give him the go-by. So she sat down beside him.

His dull eyes lit up. He took her hands in his, and said:

"Charlotte! . . . But what on earth had become of you? . . . I have been looking for you for months . . . Did you leave Paris with that painter you spoke about?"

"Yes . . . I have had nine months happiness with Achilles . . . A mad passion, old friend . . . We ate off the same plate and shared life together . . .

"He painted amazing country scenes in fruit juice. They looked like cheese maggots under a microscope . . . He sold them to an



"She stopped, astonished, as she saw sitting near the door, Monsieur Prosper"

American agent, who disposed of them as fly-papers in the United States. . . . And then, you know what he is like. . . . Achilles is only a man. . . . Just a woman's plaything. . . . His mother must have been to blame, he was so susceptible to female charms. He fell for a farm-girl. I broke one of his pictures over his head. I packed my bag and came back to Paris. . . . Now we have fallen out for good. And I gave my concierge my portrait that he painted in raspberry juice, with pine-apple and fig juice for the hair. Our passion, as you see, had lasted nine months, and the result is still-born. That's life."

"Ah! life is an abortive business, my dear Charlotte. It tickles our heart and generally leaves it broken, sorrowful and miserable. At any rate you have not given birth to a monster of recklessness that doesn't care a damn for anything."

"Oh. . . . You've a bad attack of the blues, old friend. . . . What's wrong?"

" Everything is wrong, Charlotte. When I think things over in cold blood, as I was doing while nibbling these salted almonds, I look back on my behaviour with astonishment. In one year I have wrecked sixty . . . Do you know what that means? "

" Are you broke? "

" Yes I've said good-bye to La Mothe-en-Brie, where I nearly died of boredom, come back to Paris, where I am dying of hunger . . . or very near it. I've no place of abode. My old comrade Jacobèze, you remember, the old cellarman at the *Flamant Rose*, has turned me out because I behaved like a beast at the *Mondial Palace*, and should have ended by bringing the police to his hotel. I have left my bag in Madame Cuvilange's care until I find a lodging. Well, would you like to see my entire fortune? Look, it's in my pocket-book: an old business card, a lock of red hair, photos of girls I've been crazy over for a week, some of Léa's addressed notepaper, a little

naked girl, the visiting-card of an American to whom I introduced Minoute, a metro railway ticket with the address of a man who suggested some dirty work, and some pawn-tickets. . . . There you have all that is left to me, not counting my bitter disillusion and a terrible hump. . . .”

He had put his pocket-book on the table, and was watching Charlotte to see whether she would make game of him. He looked at her without appearing to do so, his chest sunken, his shoulders drooping, his cheeks hollow and his chin unshaved.

But Charlotte was hard only on the rich; soured by her daily contact with vice, she reserved all the bitterness of her tongue for them. Unfortunate victims of circumstance and down-and-outs excited her pity, and brought a lump into her throat and tears to her eyes. She called to mind the Monsieur Prosper of former days, smartly dressed, affable to his lady customers, obliging to everybody,

and compared this recollection with the broken-down old fellow whose dull and hollow voice sounded like an un-oiled machine. Spontaneously she seized his hand, and said tenderly

"Listen, my dear. . . If I don't pick up anyone this evening, will you come and stay with me? . . . It will give us time to see how we can help you out of your mess, won't it? "

That "my dear," as Charlotte spoke it, did not ring false, as it usually did. There was an almost maternal tone about it, as of a daughter who soothes her father in trouble with tender words. It was deeply touching.

"You are good to old Prosper, Charlotte.

I am grateful for your kind thought."

He kissed her hand furtively, and added:

"I'll stay here, in this corner. Bob gives me a drink on the nod. . . If all goes well, you'll come and fetch me."

She went away, and Monsieur Prosper

thought things over, and nibbled a few more almonds. In spite of everything, he hoped that Charlotte would not meet any friend this evening, nor make any new conquest. He felt so tired and so sad, that he dreaded the lodging-house room where he would be stranded if Charlotte did not come for him.

At eleven o'clock he had a false alarm. A well-dressed old gentleman, with a flower in his coat, accosted Charlotte with obvious intentions. Monsieur Prosper, distressed, saw him sit down beside her. But he showed such anxiety that she got up a few minutes later and whispered as she passed his table :

“Don't worry. . . . He stands me a drink and it ends there.”

At one o'clock in the morning Monsieur Prosper went to fetch his bag and thank Madame Cuvilange. She gave him some cigarettes that a customer had left. He joined Charlotte and walked back with her. She still

lived in the same furnished flat in the rue de Calais

"The room is just the same," he said
"You have moved the wardrobe. It used to be on the left, I think."

"Yes, I did it on purpose. Now I can watch my clients, as I lie in bed, through the mirror."

Charlotte undressed without hurrying. She hung her string of imitation pearls on a branch of a candelabra, and cursed the perfumer who had sold her rouge that didn't stay on well. As she combed her hair, she noticed that Monsieur Prosper was still dressed.

"What are you waiting for, my dear?"

Monsieur Prosper asked humbly if she had not a little bed in the next room where he could sleep without disturbing her. She understood his kindly discretion, but protested.

"There is a shake-down, but don't worry about that. We can sleep together like good friends."



“What are you waiting for, my dear?”

They lay side by side, and talked freely about the difficulties of the present day. For the first time for some weeks Monsieur Prosper enjoyed peace and repose. Like an old sailor who has been tempest-tossed, he appreciated the quietude of reaching port, and never wanted to leave this hospitable bed. Charlotte fell asleep first. He furtively kissed her shoulder, like a wandering and grateful Arab, and then he too fell asleep. The next morning Charlotte took from her grey suède bag a fifty-franc note, and handed it to him to tide over the immediate moment. He accepted the gift, and, thanking Charlotte effusively, he said :

“I’ll go and take a hair of the dog that bit me, my dear. . . . Thank you once more. I’ll leave my bag, and will come and fetch it before dinner.”

“All right. Good luck, Prosper. . . . Touch wood and lift your left leg. . . .”

He lunched in the kitchen at the *Troglo-*

dytes He had known the chef in the old days. Being amiably disposed towards members of his union, he cooked him some cutlets that were a bit off, and whiting, not too fresh, that the customers would have refused. He walked about well-filled and contented until four o'clock, when it struck him that he had not much time to find a situation before dinner. While he turned over the pages of some novels at bargain prices in front of a bookseller's in the Boulevard de Clichy, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned round.

"Monsieur Serge!"

The philosopher was there, stick in hand, wearing a Panama and a black coat. He had fewer spots on his face and more glint in his eye.

"Let me tell you, my dear Monsieur Prosper, that I have just got my degree, and that next October I shall teach the elements of logic to dunderheads at a provincial college.

. . . In the meantime, my uncle at Poitou has

sent me five thousand-franc notes. I am delighted to meet you . . . for we will fix up a little orgy worthy of Heliogabalus."

"With pleasure, Monsieur Serge. . . . It will cheer me up . . . for, between ourselves, I've got the hump. But you? I find you as frisky as an abbé and more sprightly than Beau Brummell in luck."

"Oh! I have been very quiet this year. Since the memorable meetings with Marthe and Boudin Rose I have been leading an exemplary life, worthy of a Quaker. True, I have had a liaison with a little English dancer named Molly. She had a friend, and they insisted on my smoking opium. After Molly, I had an *affaire* with the wife of a banker who was addicted to flagellation. She initiated me by degrees *in anima vili* to the theories of Sacher Masoch. . . . And the last month or so I tried cocaine with a literary lady, who consumed two dessertspoonfuls a week, and who handed me over to the tender care of a

little Annamite, newly arrived from Saigon.
. . . So you see my life has been quite normal
and free from all excess in libertinism . . .
But now that I have got my diploma, I mean
to learn something of the more piquant
pleasures, and I look to you, my dear Monsieur
Prosper, to complete my education."

Monsieur Prosper stared at the young
graduate dumbfounded. It was obvious that
he was not joking, and that this unbridled
scholar intended to travel still farther on the
path of vice.

"We will do our best, Monsieur Serge, to
follow up this reprehensible mode of life, and,
if you really wish it, we will first of all look up
one of my lady friends who is an expert in
these matters. She lives in the rue Chaptal.
Her name is Manon de Sainte-Estèphe, and she
used to arrange special spicy parties for the
'bloods' of the Third Republic."

For five days Monsieur Serge and Monsieur
Prosper touched in some new splashes of colour

on to the canvas of their libertinism. Madame Manon de Saint-Estèphe, well paid by the graduate, had searched all the sources of her imagination. In between two nights that no pen could describe without being soaked in a welter of ithyphallic calligraphs, Monsieur Serge remarked :

“This Manon is an interesting person. If instead of working at Pythagoras’s table, drinking in the black broth of Schopenhauer’s pessimism, I had learned to wield the pen or the brush, I should have loved to paint the portrait of this lady dressed in her priest-like *peignoir*, who symbolizes in her strange eyes all the vices of passion.”

“On my soul,” replied Monsieur Prosper, “Manon de Saint-Estèphe is a beautiful specimen of our sad age. I have known her for fifteen years at the *Flamant Rose*, where she flapped her wings round the tree of impure life. Her real name is Marie Nérichon. She became Manon de Saint-Estèphe thanks to a

young Canadian, a poet and braggart, who got into a temper with her, knocked her about, and stuffed her with capsicums in one of our private rooms. She is the mistress of a stupid millionaire. He photographed her in the nude after the poses of the goddesses in the Vatican Museum, and distributed them to all the aristocrats in the Almanac de Gotha. She served to tickle the faded appetite of this man, who had made his money in selling raisins."

"Madame Manon de Saint-Estèphe pleases me," replied the philosopher. "She has a short, straight nose and the low forehead of a ghoul who sucks the soul from bloodless bodies. She also has cruel eyes, aquamarine in colour, that under their half-closed lids look like stones set in a mask. Tell me now, Monsieur Prosper, has she by any chance ever killed anyone?"

"There you touch to the depth the secret of her troubled life. They say that, at Capri, she poisoned an Italian tenor, a friend of hers

But we will give her the benefit of the doubt. A past crime gives a sort of halo to a woman of that kind."

"Just as a *bon mot* puts the hall-mark on the talent of a wit."

When Monsieur Serge had spent his five thousand francs, he left Monsieur Prosper as merry and bright as he had been when they met, and he retired for the time being to Poitou to draw up the exegesis of the disgraceful bout he had just had. That evening, at dinner-time, Monsieur Prosper, sad and weary, rang at Charlotte's door-bell.

"You!" she said. . . . "But I thought you had vanished. . . . I was wondering if you were ever coming to fetch your bag."

Monsieur Prosper gave an account of his adventures. As he told them, Charlotte frowned. At the end she could not help reprimanding him.

"You are a fool. . . . I encourage you and help you as best I can to get on your feet again,

and you immediately plunge into a life of debauch It is disgusting . especially at your time of life "

"Don't grumble at me, Charlotte, it isn't my fault On the contrary, it's yours "

"No! Well, that's the limit! "

"Yes It was with you I was first unfaithful to Louise. You opened a new Paradise to me "

"And so? "

"And so you are, in a measure, responsible for my present life."

"What cheek! Why, if it hadn't been me it would have happened with somebody else."

"No doubt. And that somebody else would have been to blame But as it is you, you cannot be heedless of my future "

"Do you want to blackmail me now? "

"Don't be angry, Charlotte . Do I look like a blackmailer? Don't I look like a down-and-out? . . So don't turn me out; let me stay again for a little while, and give me

time to pull myself together. . . . Why yes, Charlotte, I can. . . . Come, I could put up in the dressing-room where the divan is, and I would do little odd jobs in return for your kindness. . . . I will answer the door and show your friends in. They will think I am your manservant, and that will increase your prestige. Come . . . darling Charlotte, you will, won't you? . . . I shan't take up much room. . . . I will help your charwoman. . . . I will run errands. . . . And I will give you good advice. . . . But don't turn me out."

"Why don't you look for a place as a *maitre d'hôtel*?"

"I will . . . a little later . . . just now I can't work as I used to do. . . . I swear that's true. It is not unwillingness on my part. . . ."

And as Charlotte hesitated, he begged her:

"You will, won't you? . . . I may leave my bag?"

She still pitied him. Her anger had passed;

she was sorry for the mental misery of this poor man. She looked upon him as if he were an old dog who had returned to his kennel, his tail between his legs, his eyes dim, and said to him -

"Very well. You can stay here for the time being."

He installed himself, happy and contented. If he had dared to examine his mind through the mirror of truth, he would have realized that his downfall was complete, and that he would remain, till the end of his days, a pitiful object, an inveterate addict to vice. Such was his destiny. He had become a sensualist too late in life. He had joined the army of those old roués, whose one thought is to cultivate the society of purveyors of vicious pleasures and indulge in debauch, joining the cortège that follows the butterflies of the night, and in their closing years burn their wings in the candle of unsatisfied desires.

One evening, at a music-hall, Charlotte and Georgette happened to meet. They were in adjoining boxes. While their respective lovers went to the bar, during the *entr'acte*, they chatted, munching sweets, and Georgette casually mentioned Prosper's name. Charlotte told her friend that she had taken pity on the old fellow, and that she had provided him with a roof until he had the will to work.

"Prosper is living with you!" said Georgette, amazed.

"That is to say, he is occupying a bed in the dressing-room, where he sleeps. . . . He helps Anna to look after the rooms. . . . He even makes my bed. Yes, it's a hobby of his. He also counts my washing and keeps my wardrobe tidy. It is his great delight. . . . Anyhow, he does not take up much room. When he comes home at night and I have a friend, he taps on my door like a well-trained dog, finds that I am with someone, steals away on tip-toe, and goes quietly to his corner. The next

hairy man, who, with his shaggy eyebrows, looked like one of those wolves that are exhibited outside a menagerie.

At one o'clock in the morning, Monsieur Bougremel was sleeping soundly. Charlotte, her head propped up on her pillow, was thinking what she would be able to make with the silk brocade and crêpe de Chine that he had promised her. A small lamp with its blue shade shed a faint light over the room. Suddenly Charlotte put her two hands to her lips to prevent herself from calling out. .

In the wardrobe mirror, which stood at the foot of the bed, she saw an arm moving stealthily across the floor. As she gazed, transfixed with fear, she saw another arm being raised, then a head. . A moment later she recognized what she had taken to be a burglar. It was Monsieur Prosper.

Somewhat reassured, but very amazed, she pretended to be asleep, and watched beneath her half-closed eyelids. What motive had

induced him to hide under her bed? Why was he crawling out now with all the caution of a Sioux on the trail of an enemy? . . . She watched him slide gradually towards the arm-chair where Monsieur Bougremel's clothes were lying, and quietly search the pockets of his coat and trousers. Then, apparently satisfied, he crept to the dressing-room door, opened it very gently, and disappeared.

Charlotte was astounded. She could not believe that Prosper would have attempted to rob her friend. In fact, she was not quite sure what he had really done. She got up at the risk of awakening Monsieur Bougremel, for she did not want him to catch her feeling in the pockets of his clothes.

Charlotte turned it all over in her mind, and fell asleep. It was broad daylight when she was awakened by the exclamations of Monsieur Bougremel, who was pacing up and down her room like a bear in a cage. His dark hair was standing straight up on his fevered head.

"Charlotte! . ." he said, waving his coat on his hairy arm "My pocket-book has been stolen "

"What! . . . Your pocket-book? "

"I certainly didn't lose it last evening It must have been stolen "

"Stolen! . . . But, my dear, that is impossible! If you had it when you came in, it would be still in your pocket . . . How much was there in it? "

"Six hundred francs . . . Oh! it is not so much the amount . . . but it is the fact that it has been taken "

"Been taken! . . . You don't mean to insinuate that I have had anything to do with it? . . . Oh! "

"I'm not accusing anyone I am simply stating a fact "

The hostile silence of Monsieur Bougremel gave evidence of his doubts Charlotte, furious at having been wrongly accused, rated him severely. Sharp words were exchanged In

the end the gentleman from Lyons took up his hat and went off, feeling persuaded that some funny business had happened while he had been asleep. He decided never to see his *amie* again.

After he had gone, Charlotte kept beating her pillow with her angry fist and regretting this stupid incident, when someone knocked at her door.

“*Coucou!* . . . It’s I. . . .”

Monsieur Prosper, who had watched Monsieur Bougremel go out, appeared, his face betraying misplaced satisfaction, his hands behind his back. He bent over Charlotte like a kindly old grandfather, who, wishing to give a pleasant surprise to a peevish child, waved the stolen pocket-book between his finger and thumb.

“Who is going to have a nice little surprise? Why, Lottie. . . . See how well your old Prosper has worked for you. . . . Six hundred francs in monsieur’s pocket-book. Look. . . .

They were in his pocket, and by a magical touch from old Prosper. . . Heigh presto!

. Here they are in Lottie's hand!"

Charlotte listened to his remarks, gripping the sheets. At the end she exclaimed:

"You dirty old skunk!"

The pocket-book fell from Prosper's hand. He could not believe his ears.

"Yes. You are only a contemptible idiot. You would have been better employed sleeping last night than pulferring my friend's pockets. Ah! it is miserable, what you have done. You have cut me off for ever from a man who brings me a thousand francs every visit and gives me stuff for my dresses. And just for the sake of stealing six hundred francs! It is a pretty sort of surprise! Thank you."

Charlotte got up, trembling with indignation, in her little pale yellow chemise trimmed with black lace and decorated with a cat's head made of velvet. She thrust the leather

pocket-book under Prosper's nose, and exclaimed :

"I'll have no more of this. . . . Robbing my lovers when I'm asleep! "

"But, Charlotte, it was for you. . . ."

"Have I ever asked you to do such a thing, you old skunk? And that's the way you behave. . . . Enough! . . . Pack up your bag and clear out, right now. . . ."

She pushed Monsieur Prosper towards the dressing-room, and when he had packed his few things she pushed him on to the landing. It only wanted a torch in her right hand, and a sword in her left, to personify Saint Michael of the Quat'z-Arts, a humorous-looking archangel clothed in an alluring chemise. On reaching the landing Monsieur Prosper, who was almost crying, turned to her in a beseeching manner.

"Get out!" Charlotte repeated. "I never want to see you again. . . . Go! Clear off! . . ."

At the very moment that Monsieur Prosper opened the door, his shoulders bent, Monsieur Bougremel reappeared. He was surprised to see this forlorn-looking fellow slinking away from Charlotte's vindictive rage, and inquired

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing . . . nothing . . . I am kicking out this old sponger. He has just been asking me for ten francs . . . He is one of my father's friends, a ne'er-do-well!"

Then, as she noticed Monsieur Bougremel's happy smile, she added in astonishment:

"But . . . I . . . I am surprised to see you back, my friend . . . You accused me of . . ."

"Tut! . . . Tut! . . . Come and kiss me, my dear . . . I withdraw my unjust suspicions and beg your pardon . . . When I got back to my hotel I found that my baggage had been tampered with, and several shirts and other things of no value had been stolen

So it is most probable that they took my pocket-book at the same time."

They were soon friends again, and Monsieur Bougremel promised Charlotte a handsome bracelet, and asked her to lunch with him at one o'clock at a restaurant near by. As he went out he noticed that the old fellow was still there on the edge of the pavement. The old man came up to him, hat in hand.

"Forgive me, monsieur," muttered Prosper. "You are Charlotte's friend, who was with her last night?"

Courage and Monsieur Bougremel did not go well together. He came to the conclusion that this old man was one of Charlotte's cast-off lovers, with a dagger up his sleeve, so he stepped back a pace.

"What do you want?"

"Don't be afraid, monsieur, I am not dangerous. . . . I simply want to tell you that it was not Charlotte who took your pocket-book. . . . It was I. . . ."

"What?"

"Yes, monsieur . . . Don't be angry with your lady friend . . . It was I who hid under the bed, and I am alone to blame . . . I wanted to tell you, because this mean action weighs heavily on my conscience, and I should have been very miserable if I had not confessed to you."

Monsieur Bougremel was not courageous, but he was suspicious. He dismissed Prosper with a wave of the hand, and thought over what had happened. He shuddered to think what a shock he would have had if, during the night, he had seen a man crawl from under the bed. He realized also that woman's duplicity is beyond all bounds, and conjured up various hypotheses which might explain the presence of the old fellow in Charlotte's room. A secret villain, a crime perhaps agreed upon by these two people. Then he returned to his hotel and scribbled this note, which he gave to the porter, telling him to send it by the page-boy.

“DEAR FRIEND,—My credulity has limits, and my forbearance can only go to a certain length. You have been making a fool of me. It is therefore not necessary for me to send you the bracelet. Good-bye.

“ADOLPHE BOUGREMEL.”

When Charlotte received this note a set smile hung round her lips. She read it over three times, but did not understand it. In fact, she never really understood what he meant.

CHAPTER VI

THREE years had passed. In the daily gossip of the *Butte* one might have read that three years ago on this very day -

"June 4th Monsieur Prosper gained his first game at *rams* at the Station Café at La Mothe-en-Brie Sun rises at 5 16 a.m. First quarter of the moon"

It was ten minutes to twelve. Two men in soft felt hats were wandering along the Place de l'Opéra. One was fair, thin and still young. The other, white-haired, bent and elderly. These two personages were not contemplating a crime suitable for the first chapters of a serial. They contented themselves with beckoning and winking at the passers-by. They were two guides, not employed by recognized agencies, Monsieur Prosper and Monsieur Oostevælde.

After many avatars, Monsieur Prosper had become a guide to foreigners who nightly wished to visit the haunts of the city. He had lost all sense of shame and self-respect. His former principles had vanished in these unholy nights, and his dignity had flown to the winds in evil dawns. He had, by this time, associated himself with a fugitive from Belgian justice, Jean-François Oostvelde, known as Jean-Jean Flageolet, and the two of them every evening waylaid various idlers in order to extract from them, under propitiatory influence of alcohol, dollars, pesetas or florins.

Oostvelde stopped to light a cigarette in front of the *Café de la Paix*, and gave a scrutinizing glance at the passing crowd.

"Look at all these fools drinking like dolts," said Monsieur Prosper. "Ah! Good Lord, what wave of Puritanism! They don't know how to enjoy themselves in Paris nowadays. . . . Business is rotten. I got thirty francs the day before yesterday from an Englishman

who wanted to see the markets Yesterday not
a bean This evening a blank
Enough to give one the hump . "

An Englishman came near him He
whispered

"Want a nice girl, sir? . . . Want me to
show you round the most exciting places? "

But the Englishman pushed him roughly
aside, and growled:

"Get away "

Oostevelde looked at him, and muttered
under his breath

"You ugly-looking blighter," and followed
Monsieur Prosper, who was showing some
transparent cards to a tall man in evening dress
He explained

"You take them like this, monsieur
Hold them in front of an electric torch, and
move the card up and down like so The
illusion is complete . . See? "

Monsieur Prosper began to move the card
The stolid man watched without saying a word



"But the Englishman pushed him roughly aside and growled, 'Get away.'"

Oostevelde came to the rescue. He supplemented Monsieur Prosper's explanations. In the end the stolid gentleman put his hand in his waistcoat pocket.

"Only five francs," said Monsieur Prosper enticingly. . . . "The three for twelve francs. Will you take the three? "

But the tall, stolid man took a toothpick out of his pocket, looked at the two guides, and, with a sigh of pity and disgust, walked away.

Monsieur Prosper, disappointed, switched off his little electric torch. Oostevelde, furious, called out in a husky voice :

"'Op it, you dirty mess! " And finished up with: "There you are, they're all alike, Prosper. . . . Nobody knows how to enjoy himself in Paris nowadays, I told you."

They strolled along in the warm night air. The crowd grew thinner. The cafés began to close. Two *grues*, who did the beat from the Opéra to the Madeleine, said as they passed :

"How's business? "

Monsieur Prosper shook his head Oostvelde threw his cigarette-end against a kiosk.

"Leave 'em alone . . . They've got the rats," said the blonde "They've got the stomachache Come along, Paulette."

They vanished in the fluorescence of the street lamps as the sound of their heels died away Suddenly Monsieur Prosper stopped and looked at a smart car which pulled up at the corner of the rue Scribe Inside, a lady beckoned him with her white-gloved hand Monsieur Prosper squeezed Oostvelde's arm

"I know her " he whispered. "It's Yvette de Merlanges, who often used to dine at the *Flamant Rose* "

"Maybe there's something doing with her "

"Ah! my boy, it's my customer, and I'm going to keep her myself "

"Prosper halves partner! "

"No, this is mine "

"You won't do that? "

"Won't I? You'll see "

And without noticing the evil look that the Belgian gave him, Monsieur Prosper went up to the car.

"Fancy seeing you!" said the beautiful Madame de Merlanges. . . . "I recognized you immediately, Monsieur Prosper. . . . What are you doing here? I thought you had retired into the country?"

"I have come back to Paris. I got bored down there. I am organizing Epicurean *soirées* for distinguished amateurs. . . . I am a kind of prospector of unique sensations."

"No, really! . . . How fortunate I am in meeting you. I'm terribly fed-up this evening. I was just going home. Get into my car. We'll arrange a charming little programme. . . . Give my chauffeur the address."

Monsieur Prosper gave the address of Manon de Saint-Estèphe, rue Chaptal, and sat beside his former customer, while Oostevelde, who had been watching the scene in the shadow, jumped into a taxi, and told the driver not to

lose sight of the lunousine outlined in black and gold. On the way, Madame de Merlanges opened her heart to her old *maître d'hôtel*.

She was a superb creature, and her forty years emphasized her beauty, as a fine picture shows the sure style of a classic *chef-d'œuvre*. Her wealth of jewels, her ornaments of diamonds mounted in platinum, the sapphire on her fourth finger, her gown, her shoes and all the details of her dress displayed the opulence of a successful courtesan who lived well.

"You are as young as ever and even more beautiful," said Prosper, as he admired her profile, which was like a Florentine cameo.

She smiled contentedly, and gave him a short account of her good luck. At the races she had met a distinguished Spaniard who was being wheeled into the saddling paddock in a bath chair. He was paralysed on his right side. But the left eye of this impenitent hemiplegic had fixed Madame de Merlanges,

and Don Alonso de Zamora y Tinto conceived for her an irresistible passion. He entertained her at his house in the Avenue Kléber, sitting on hot-air cushions, and caressed her with his left arm. When, by mischance, she kissed him on the right side, the distinguished Spaniard waved his left hand and wrote on the writing tablet:

“I don’t feel anything there. . . . Kiss me on the left.”

Like an artillery man being directed in her fire by an observer, Madame de Merlanges adjusted her range and tenderly kissed the left parietal of the trans-Pyrenean gentleman, who, satisfied, immediately wrote on his writing-pad:

“Many thanks, my darling. . . . I have felt your *beso*.”

The male nurse of the distinguished Spaniard that very day had the happy idea of outlining with a blue pencil the zone of demarcation on his master’s skin, so that

Madame de Merlanges did not in future make any mistakes. Her libertine powers were perforce very limited, with a lover whose surface was reduced fifty per cent, but she did not complain, for she knew she would be rewarded. In fact, the nurse remarked one morning, that two-thirds of his august master's body seemed to be insensible. In consequence, he readjusted his blue lines so that Madame de Merlanges lost no time in useless caresses. Six months later three-quarters of Don Alonso became insensible. The nurse again adjusted the blue line, and, as he was a heartless and cynical attendant, he said to Madame de Merlanges, when she arrived:

“Look at his skin. It reminds one of a staff officer's chart, marking the retreat of the enemy.”

When he died, Madame de Merlanges was happy to learn that Don Alonso had left her three million francs and a *château* near Rouen.

"So, you are contented," added Monsieur Prosper. . . . "What more can you want?"

"I want some new sensations, my friend. . . . For eighteen months I have tickled the ribs of a paralytic. I promise you that is not very alluring. Now I want a little amusement. What joys can you offer me?"

Monsieur Prosper spoke of Manon de Saint-Estèphe, and outlined a plan of campaign. With the help of Manon, they would have access to La Baronne's house, and there they would find all manner of intoxicating delights.

"Who is La Baronne?" asked Madame de Merlanges, growing interested.

"A diminutive and very courteous person, who entertains a set of highbrow amateurs in his studio in the Boulevard des Batignolles. You'll see, La Baronne will amuse you. . . . Ah, here is Manon's house. . . . I'll go and find out the countersign, and we shall then be admitted into the sanctuary. . . . The fee is two hundred francs. . . ."

Madame de Merlanges slipped the notes into Monsieur Prosper's hand. He rang the ground-floor bell, gave a hundred and fifty francs to Manon for the password, pocketed the difference, and came back and gave the chauffeur La Baronne's address. He got into the limousine without noticing that Oostevelde's taxi was keeping them in sight.

A few minutes later, Monsieur Prosper and Madame de Merlanges crossed a garden and reached the front door of the studio.

"There's no one here . . ." murmured Madame de Merlanges. "I can't hear a sound."

"Oh, yes there is. . . . At this time La Baronne has visitors."

He knocked quietly three times, and slipped a little red card, that Manon had given him, under the door. Soft footsteps were heard approaching. Then came the click of the shutter, behind a small spy-hole, being pushed

back, and he whispered the password through the brass bars :

“ Pivoine and Pamela.”

The door opened immediately, and La Baronne welcomed Madame de Merlanges in a very gracious manner, kissing her hand affectionately. La Baronne was about fifty, but he was so slight in build and so slim that one might have taken him for a youth whose skin had become wrinkled by staying too long in the water. His curious silhouette was worthy of a place in the Dupuytren Museum of depraved pleasures. He was wearing a Pompeian red silk dressing-gown lined with beaver; its short sleeves showed his bare arms, hairy and tattooed. But his tattoo marks in no way resembled the coarse designs that decorate Mediterranean sailors or Whitechapel hooligans. They were two geishas, executed in colour, two wonderful miniatures, of very intricate and marvellous workmanship, for which La Baronne had once paid a hundred pounds

to an artist in Yeddo, when he was visiting Japan

No one knew his nationality. A trafficker in vice, he had pandered to his desires, always unsatisfied, all over the world, and knew, in turn, the scandals and orgies of Charlottenburg, Hampstead and Greenwich village. He spoke French with an undefinable accent; wore a huge ruby on his first finger, a jade necklet, and, on his right ankle, a sort of chaplet of human teeth threaded on a green silk Rhumkorff coil.

He made a sign to Madame de Merlanges to walk on tip-toe, and gallantly helped her to take off her hat and evening cloak. Then he whispered in her ear:

"Speak quietly, I beg of you, dear lady. My home is the rendezvous of delicate eardrums. But before entering the sanctuary, drop an obol of twenty-five louis into the box. Here is the slit. Thank you."

Madame de Merlanges did so, and the notes

disappeared into the wooden box that La Baronne had stolen from the porch of Saint Sulpice, because of the superscription: "For the poor of the parish."

"Very good," said the host, as his wrinkled face lit up with a smile. "Now, one more little formality, dear lady."

He stretched out his arm and stroked the visitor from the ankle to the neck. As this unusual behaviour astonished Madame de Merlanges, he explained in a low voice:

"I wish to make sure that my guests are not armed."

La Baronne had good reason to act as he did. The previous winter a young woman, a prey to one of those love chagrins that neither gold nor kisses nor blows were able to cure, had shot herself with a revolver in the course of the orgy arranged by La Baronne. This had taught him a lesson. The opium devotees, aroused from their Nirvana by this brutal report, rushed at the deceased like a pack of

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startled jackals A young poet, torn from his dreams, hanged himself, in a fit of madness, from the balcony of the loggia Two English girls, morphiomaniacs, nearly strangled themselves in their interrupted coma And, while the studio became a pandemonium worthy of disturbing and alarming the ghosts of miracle-mongers and magicians, La Baronne, helped by a friend, wrapped the deceased in a cloak and carried her to a carriage belonging to one of his faithful followers, and deposited her in a dark and lonely spot in the Bois de Boulogne

"Here you are . . . Everything is all right, my dear lady," declared La Baronne, whose red dressing-gown flew open, shamelessly showing the supple body of a young Spartan "Now I can install you
Follow me "

Madame de Merlanges entered the studio

The soft mauve light prevented one from, at first, seeing clearly people and objects Little

by little, on the left, she saw, on a sofa in the shadow, among a heap of cushions, two couples dressed in white silk kimonos, rigid and still in temporary death.

“Hashish! . . .” whispered La Baronne.

Madame de Merlanges moved forward a few steps, and stopped in front of a woman scantily clothed, who lay stretched under the loggia stairs. Her head was thrown back on a scarlet cushion, and her mouth was wide open. Her eyelids, tinged with blue, slightly open, like a ripe chestnut, enabled one to see her revulsive sclerosis, whilst her nose, eaten away to the cartilage, and her shrivelled upper lip were smothered in white powder. Her right hand grasped spasmodically her torn, white lawn chemise, and her other hand scraped at the powder on a brass tray by her side.

“Snow . . .” murmured La Baronne.

And bending down to the ear of the neophyte, with a quiet smile, he added:

“What is your particular sin, my lady?”

The pipe? . . . The syringe? . . . The
snuff? "

At the moment when Monsieur Prosper and Madame de Merlanges went into the house on the Boulevard des Batignolles, Oostvelde got out of his taxi and dismissed the driver

For a quarter of an hour he walked up and down, his brows knit, his hands in his pockets. He was angry. He objected to being flouted by this old imbecile Prosper, who promised that he would share with him any piece of good luck. But as he had behaved like this, Oostvelde determined to have his revenge. He made his way into the garden and watched the studio in silence. He knew that his colleague was there. So, in order to find out what was going on, he climbed on to the roof, and by means of a water-spout got up to the sky-lights. Shielding his eyes, he was able, by degrees, to see what sort of amusement La Baronne's guests were indulging in, and, having satisfied himself,

he got down. He reached the Boulevard, hastened to a little café in the rue Biot, and asked the proprietor if Inspector Blondac happened to be about.

"Blondac? . . . He has just gone out. . . . You'll find him in the Avenue Clichy."

Oostevelde found the inspector, and said to him confidentially:

"Ah, my boy . . . do you want to make a good coup round here? "

"What sort of a coup? "

"Cocaine . . . opium and the whole caboodle. . . . Follow me and you'll catch 'em in the act. . . . Enough of 'em to fill a Black Maria."

"You're sure that in the meantime they won't have hopped it? "

"No, it's a cop. . . . But we must hurry up. You keep your optic on a certain Prosper, an old rascal who carries on his traffic in the cloak-room at the *Troglodytes*, and you will catch him red-handed."

"Wait, I'll telephone to the chief"

Five minutes later everything was arranged Oostevelde, with a joyful step, accompanied Inspector Blondac, looking forward with secret delight to his coming vengeance They were soon joined by the chief, his secretary, and three other inspectors

"You are quite sure that they are trafficking secretly in drugs?" said the chief before he went into the garden . "If your information is not correct I shall lock you up, I warn you"

"I swear by all that's holy! You can rely on me, Monsieur Chief . There are five or six years' clink waiting for that little lot!"

The raid was Homeric A tragic comedy, heart-rending and amusing at the same time The arrival of the chief and his men robbed La Baronne of all his sang-froid He walked up and down the studio bewildered, calling heaven and hell to witness his righteous indignation

"Someone has betrayed me!" he panted, waving his tattooed arms towards the shaded opal lights. . . . "I am sold by a renegade. But I will break the face of the dog who has done me this dirty trick. One does all one can to bring happiness to mankind, and all one gets is a kick in return! . . . Ho! Ha! I dare you to touch me! . . . Remove your filthy hands. . . . Monsieur Chief . . . prevent your minions from touching me! . . ."

The two inspectors, amused by La Baronne's protestations, seized him by the shoulders and the heels and carried him into the garden, while he kept crying out in a shrill voice :

"Monsieur Chief! . . . Monsieur Chief! They are soiling my skin. . . . These common fellows are dirtying me! . . . Order them to desist from their outrageous treatment. . . ."

But the chief was engaged elsewhere. He was collecting, with his secretary, the boxes of cocaine, the syringes, the phials of morphia and

the supplies of opium. He was searching all present. Madame de Merlanges, several other women, and a few people whose identity was unquestioned were in no way perturbed. When it came to Monsieur Prosper's turn, Inspector Blondac remarked:

"This man is reported as being concerned in the traffic along with La Baronne."

"Very well," said the chief. "Take him in charge."

Monsieur Prosper protested vehemently, but all his protestations were unavailing. He soon found himself on the pavement in front of a couple of taxis, already filled with unwilling fares, and sorrowfully he got in alongside a pale young man and a couple of police officers. Just as the taxi was moving off, he looked out of the window and saw, standing between the chief and Blondac, his companion Oosteveldt, his hands in his pockets, chuckling and making fun of him. Monsieur Prosper realized the truth. He was suddenly overcome with a

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chilly sensation, a feeling of loneliness and abandonment. Friends are illusions. They desert you one after the other, and as they go they leave a sorrowful impression on one's mind, the sadness of a rainy evening.

CHAPTER VII

THE shadows lengthen on la Butte, and the slanting rays of the setting sun gild the cupolas of the Sacré-Cœur. It is autumn. Swallows describe hyperbolas above the houses. Cats creep along the walls to slip into the cool shadow.

The apartment houses that shelter the foreign wayfarer, far from home, light up *one by one*. In the office on the ground floor, Madame Rancini, the landlady, takes her vermicelli soup with her maid-of-all-work, cantankerous and silent. The first floor is in darkness, for the tenants are dining in the neighbouring little restaurant. On the second floor three rooms are lit up, those of two café singers and a chorus girl. They are dressing in a hurry to get to their work. On the third,

the top storey, there is only one light, which filters through the drawn curtains, where two lovers, a sempstress and a draper's assistant, are chasing the rainbow-hued chimera of love. The room, with its patched sheets and stained counterpane, has a musty smell about it.

"Prosper is late," said Madame Rancini to the maid, as she served the cheese.

"He's lazy, I tell you, Madame Rancini. . . . He always has some excuse for not getting here to time. . . . They are lies. . . . I wouldn't wait for him any longer. . . . He ought to be here to take charge!"

Monsieur Prosper arrives, makes an excuse, goes into a dark room, puts on a red waistcoat, black apron and a pair of old slippers, and comes to Madame Rancini to take his orders for the night.

"Prosper . . . I am leaving you twenty bottles of beer in the cupboard . . . ten ham-sandwiches . . . twenty-five bananas and a bottle of brandy. Don't forget . . . eighteen

small glasses to the bottle . . . Here are the keys of 8, 13 and 15 . . . They are vacant . . . If any doubtful customer comes, take twenty-five francs before giving him the key . . . The day before yesterday two customers in No. 9 nearly did a bunk at daybreak without paying. . . . You need not change the sheets . . . I've turned the pillow-cases . . . And I forbid you to go up and play piquet with Mireille. The first time I catch you in her room I shall throw you out . . . Do you understand? "

"Yes, Madame Rancini "

So Monsieur Prosper, the night porter, took over his duties, and Madame Rancini went up to bed.

It is half-past nine . . . Shadows have spread over the rue Lepic, and the urchins have deserted the sloping pavements . . . Monsieur Prosper is smoking his pipe under the lamp . . . He has plenty of time before he will go to his camp-bed under the staircase, where, fully dressed, covered up in an old rug, he will be



"Monsieur Prosper is smoking his pipe."

awakened between interrupted snoozes by the impatient ringing of the tenants.

The electric bell sounds. He goes up three flights, wearying to his tired legs, and knocks at the door of No. 17.

"Some beer and sandwiches," says a man's voice.

"And please be quick," adds a woman's.

And, as he goes out, Monsieur Prosper's ears catch the sound of a kiss. He descends the stairs slowly. No shadow of a smile crosses his badly-shaved face. No sigh of envy lights up his sad expression. Now he is no longer interested in love affairs. Four years have been sufficient to extinguish thoughts of that kind. His St. Martin's summer of sentimentality has been forgotten in a sad cortège of deceptions, weariness and misery. His cheeks are sunken under his white hair. His face is deeply lined. His back is bent and his gait is halting and hesitant.

Eleven o'clock. The sleeping house is

quiet The rings of the bell are few He has just shown a couple to No 15, a hefty young fellow as strong as a wrestler at a fair, and a wretched-looking woman of the streets in a knitted green silk blouse, with painted cheeks, hair plastered low on her forehead, piercing eyes under heavy eyebrows that meet Not long ago he would have pictured with pleasure the delights of these casual lovers To-day he is indifferent A night porter at the foot of la Butte, in a miserable, dirty house, he awaits without hope the sad dawn which will free him from his task until sunset, when he will once again put on his slippers and his apron

Midnight The tenants return to their quarters saturated with cheap scent Doors close in the dark passages The laughter of a woman as she goes to bed is lost in the staircase, punctuated by the cymbal-like sound of a wash-basin as it knocks against an enamel pail

Before going back into the vestibule, Monsieur Prosper looks up and down the deserted street. A starlit sky. The sabbatical lament of a love-lorn cat fills the silence of a neighbouring cul-de-sac. A couple with their arms around each other wend slowly up the steep street. Lips to lips, hand clasping hand, they search after the indescribable intoxication, in the cool breeze of the autumn night.

Suddenly, hurried steps come down the stairs. . . . Monsieur Prosper goes back into the vestibule, and sees at the foot of the staircase a woman with dishevelled hair, wringing her hands, haggard and horror-struck. It is the woman from No. 15.

"What *is* the matter?" asks Monsieur Prosper.

Her teeth chatter. . . . She stutters :

"*Garçon*. . . . Come at once. . . . He is a beast. He wants to tear me open with his knife. . . . Oh! . . . I'm terrified! I'm terrified!"

"Come! Come! . . . We can't have a scandal . . . I'll go and speak to him "

Monsieur Prosper goes up to the third floor, followed at a discreet distance by the trembling woman. He goes into the room. The wrestler is then sitting on the edge of the bed. He stares at him vacantly, half-witted. He scrutinizes the new-comer unmoved.

"Ah, well, my good man," says Monsieur Prosper in a conciliatory tone . . . "Is something wrong? You must not attack your little friend, come, come! "

The wrestler does not reply. His hand grips his open pocket-knife. His lips, above his prognathous chin, do not move. He is silent.

"Give me that toy. . . . You shall have it back if you ask at the office in the morning "

Monsieur Prosper takes the knife from his limp hand, and taps him on the shoulder.

"That's better, my good fellow . . . Go to bed and get some sleep "

MIDNIGHT ON THE PLACE PIGALLE

"Rmmmm!" grunts the wrestler; his sadic expression gradually fades away and his eyelids droop.

And as he slips into bed, Monsieur Prosper tries to reassure the woman.

"You see. . . . His fit is over. . . . There is no need for alarm now. . . . Good night, my good girl."

One o'clock in the morning. Silence stalks through the corridors. Under the dark staircase, wrapped in his rug, Monsieur Prosper pictures in his mind the little white house at La Mothe-en-Brie with its mossy roof and its walls covered with mauve wistaria in flower, nestling in the peaceful country at the end of a beautiful day. And when fatigue closes his heavy eyelids and sleep banishes the sad realities of life, he begins to dream of a Paradise lost.

THE END

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